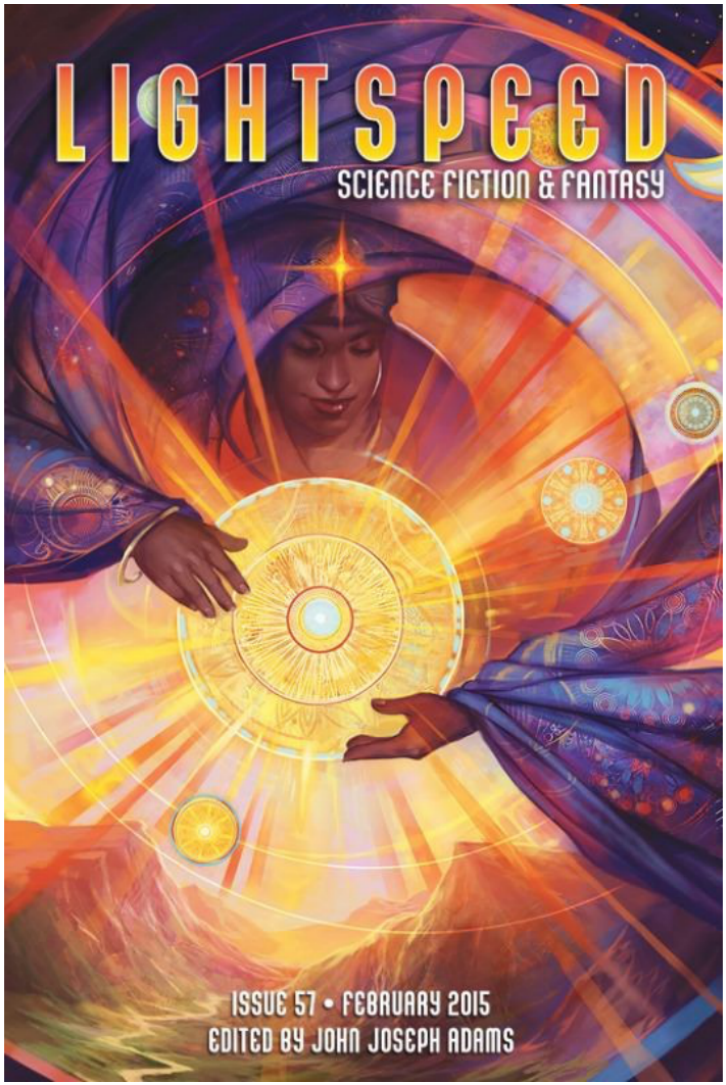
LIGHTSPEED
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY
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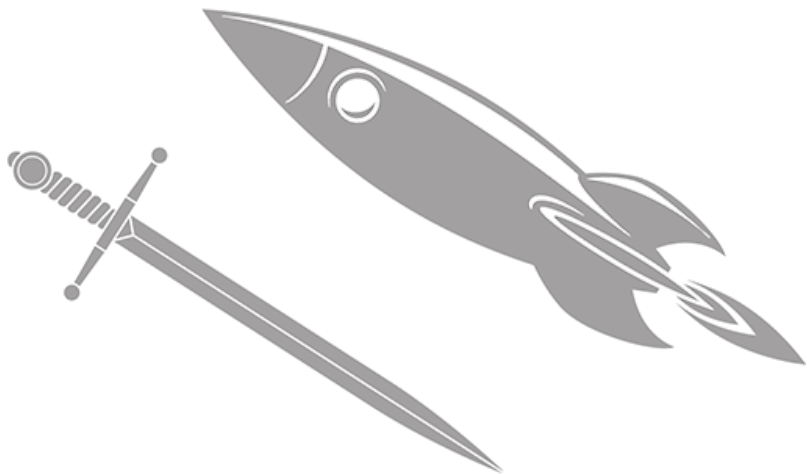
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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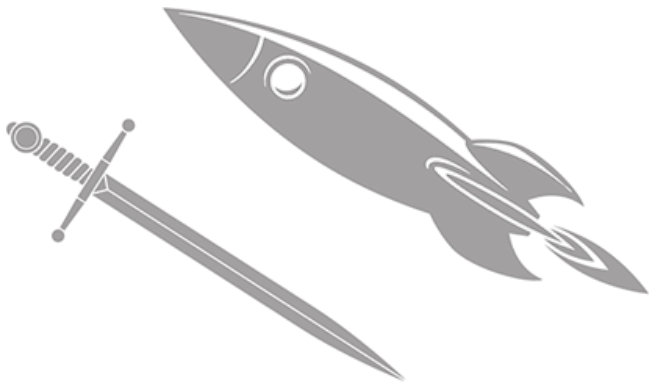
FROM THE EDITOR



Editorial, February 2015

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue fifty-seven of *Lightspeed!*

In case you missed the news last month, just a reminder that we're currently in the midst of crowdfunding our next big project. Last year, we asked women to destroy science fiction, and they did — *spectacularly* — in our crowdfunded, all-women special issue, Women Destroy Science Fiction!. Never ones to rest on our laurels, we thought it best to continue with that fine tradition and engage in a little more destructive behavior. Thus, this year's anniversary issue will be Queers Destroy Science Fiction!, guest edited by Seanan McGuire.

As we did with Women Destroy Science Fiction!, we're conducting a Kickstarter campaign in support of Queers Destroy Science Fiction!. We were planning to publish the issue whether we reached our funding goal or not, but that turned out to not be a valid concern: We launched on January 15 and surpassed our original goal in about seven hours. Seven! Hours! As great as Women Destroy did last year, Queers Destroy is doing even better; fifteen days in, WDSF was at 455% funding, whereas QDSF is already at 588%! Thanks so much to all of you who have supported the project thus far!

Though we've reached our goal, we've still got several awesome stretch goals to unlock. We've already unlocked a number of them, including a Kickstarter-exclusive anthology sampler of queer stories (curated by me). And, as I write this shortly before this issue's publication date, we're right on the verge of unlocking our first big stretch goal: the Queers Destroy Horror! special issue of *Nightmare.* In fact we're so close that by the time most of you read this, we probably *will* have unlocked it. But there are still others to unlock as well, including Queers Destroy Fantasy! and even Queers Destroy . . . Filk!

If you've already backed the Kickstarter, stay tuned: We're going to be adding some additional reward options and add-on purchases

to the campaign shortly.

The Queers Destroy Science Fiction! Kickstarter campaign began on January 15 and will conclude February 16. To learn more, visit destroysf.com/queers.

• • • •

This month also sees the publication of my new anthology *Wastelands 2* (the sequel to my bestselling — and first! — anthology, *Wastelands).* It will be published by Titan Books on February 24 and contains nearly 200,000 words of fiction, including stories by George R.R. Martin, Seanan McGuire, Hugh Howey, Nancy Kress, David Brin, Ann Aguirre, Paolo Bacigalupi, Lauren Beukes, and Junot Díaz, among others. If you'd like to learn more about the book, read some of the stories for free online, or read interviews with the authors, visit my *Wastelands 2* website at johnjosephadams.com/wastelands-2.

Speaking of *Wastelands,* Titan also just recently released the original *Wastelands* in mass market paperback edition. So if you've been wanting to read it all these years and just couldn't abide paying more than $7.99 for it, now's your chance!

• • • •

With our announcements out of the way, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original science fiction by Brooke Bolander ("And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead") and Caroline M. Yoachim ("Red Planet"), along with SF reprints by John Kessel ("Buffalo") and David Barr Kirtley ("Veil of Ignorance").

Plus, we have original fantasy by Maria Dahvana Headley ("And the Winners Will Be Swept Out to Sea") and Will Kaufman ("Things You Can Buy for a Penny"), and fantasy reprints by Mary Rickert ("The Girl Who Ate Butterflies") and Adam-Troy Castro ("Cerile and the Journeyer").

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author and artist spotlights, a feature interview with Ann Leckie, and our review column, this month written by Sunil Patel.

For our ebook readers, we also have an ebook-exclusive novella reprint of "In the House of Aryaman, A Lonely Signal Burns," by Elizabeth Bear. We're also delighted to share an excerpt from

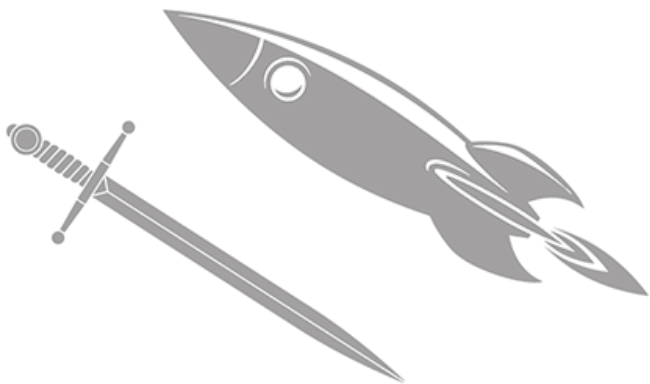
Elizabeth Bear's new novel, *Karen Memory,* and an excerpt from *Gemini Cell,* Myke Cole's latest book.

Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed,* is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy,* published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination, Armored, Brave New Worlds, Wastelands,* and *The Living Dead.* Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects, Robot Uprisings, Dead Man's Hand, Operation Arcana, Wastelands 2, Press Start to Play,* and The Apocalypse Triptych: *The End is Nigh, The End is Now,* and *The End Has Come.* Called "the reigning king of the anthology world" by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

SCIENCE FICTION



And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead

Brooke Bolander

The mobster has a gun pressed to Rack's forehead. The mobster has a god-shitting *gun* pressed to her partner's fucking forehead, and the only thing Rhye can do is watch and scream as the man smiles at her and pulls the trigger and blows Rack's perfect brains out from between his ears.

Rhye has her guns drawn before the other Ganymede fuckers can twitch, but it's way too late — the damage is done and smeared across the walls and floor and ceiling. Synthetic blood and bone look exactly the same as the real deal. She puts three shots into the flesh slab that did it *(he's dead he's dead gods fuck it no nononono)* and then the rest of his pals are on her like the three-times-fucked human jackals they are, pulling her down. The room stinks of blood and gunsmoke and fear-sweat. For the first time in her life, those smells make Rhye want to gag. Her ears are ringing — whether from the gunshots or god knows what else — and it feels like the floor is falling away beneath her motorcycle boots.

She's still struggling against their meaty fingers to reach Rack when the head goon breaks her nose with a squared-off fist the size of the moon he's from. She barely feels the bone snap. He's dead. He's dead and the world is grayscale, all the color leaching from it to pool around her feet in a red puddle.

"He was trying to crack it, you *fucks.* The fuck is wrong with you? He was coming out, he was going to try again, it was just a fucking hiccup! Jesus *fuck,* do you think you're going to get your cunting kid back now?" Her throat hurts from screaming. Blood from her nose is backing up into her sinuses, half-choking her. She doesn't care. "I'll kill you, I'll fucking kill all of you. You're fucking *dead,* do you hear me? Let me go, let me fucking *go* — "

"We hired you and your partner to finish job. Nothing was ever said about quitting," the man says. His voice is heavily accented, breath reeking of onions and vodka. "If pretty boy couldn't bring what we need out, pretty boy is useless, like tits on bull or useless

cyborg bitch. His consciousness can stay inside box and rot for all I care. But! — " he pokes Rhye in the forehead with one of his blunt fingers — "I think *you* care. I think you care very much, yes? Yesyes?"

"I'm going to kill you, you fuck." She says it slowly, pronouncing every word with deathly clarity. "I'm going to shove my gun up your ass and blow a hole so fucking wide a whale's *prick* wouldn't fill the gap."

"Not if you want partner back," he says, throwing an uplink cable at her. "Plug in, get data out. Get pretty boy, too, if you like. Fail, and you die together. Is very simple."

And because she *does* care, cares too fucking much, cares, and the sight of Rack slumped over in the chair with a neat round hole scorched into his forehead is squeezing at the heart she's always claimed not to have, Rhye spits blood and hate in their employer's face and jams the jack into the port at the base of her skull.

• • • •

The first time she meets Rack, Rhye's fresh out of the army and fresh back from one of the meat-grinders the humans pay her kind to fight in. The children of wires and circuits aren't worth a tinker's fuck compared to the children of real flesh and bone, so far as the world's concerned. The recruitment agents pluck her off the streets when she's twelve and send her to a training camp and she's good with linguistics and better at killing, so they keep her hands busy until she's twenty-five and then they spit her back out again like a mouthful of cum. She has gray curly hair cropped short and gray dead eyes and calluses on the inside of her palms worn hard and horny from years of holding pistol grips. She's small and lean, which makes people underestimate her, but she's cool enough and don't-fuck-with-me enough that most know to jump the fuck out of the way when they see her coming. The ones that don't get flashed a warning glimpse of her teeth and holsters.

There's nothing funnier than watching some drunken fleshsack piss his drawers when that happens. One minute he's trying to grab a skin-job whore's ass, the next he's looking his own death in the face and wetting himself like a goddamned baby. It never fails to tickle the shit out of Rhye.

She bums around the city looking for something to do, gets in a

moderate amount of trouble in every district she lands (her and the cops are on a first-name basis; it's touching), and finally ends up at the deathmatches, fighting her own kind for a quick buck in front of a bunch of screaming yahoos. Rhye doesn't really do it for the cash, although money for smokes is always nice. She does it because killing is the only thing she's good at, and quite frankly, she enjoys it. If the poor fucks she gunned down didn't want to be there, they wouldn't be. They're all fucked, everything is fucked, and the pain at least makes her feel something.

Then one night in the arena her foot slips and the hulking musclebound mountain of nano-technology she's peppering with shots catches up and busts three of her ribs and one of her wrists. Rhye still manages to take him down one-handed, but even with the purse prize she doesn't have enough money for a fixer. They toss her out into the alleyway behind the joint like a kid's broken toy and there she lies, soaked to the skin from the oily rain that never seems to stop falling in this fucking gray ashtray of a city.

And that's where Rack finds her, that clean-fingered, mild-mannered motherfucker. Why he's even there in the first place is beyond her. All she knows is that one minute she's huddling in a puddle, exhausted and hurting, and the next there's a hand extended her way and a pair of sad brown eyes looking down at her *(fucking puppy-dog expression, clean-shaven and thoughtful and for fuck's sake he was wearing a tie and carrying a briefcase, can you believe that shit)* and no matter how hard she glares at him, he won't fucking go. Rhye shows him the grips of her pistols and he just looks at her, just fucking *looks.* That surprises her; she's not expecting young Mr. Salaryman to be stubborn.

"Fuck off, White Collar," she says. "Do I fucking know you?"

"No," he replies, exasperatingly patient, "but I know what it looks like when somebody needs a hand. C'mon. Let's get you out of the rain."

She's hurting too bad to put up much of a fuss. He loops an arm beneath her own and together the two of them limp back to his flat, her getting oily water and blood all over his nice white shirt the entire way.

If he had been smart, he would have left her where she lay. Fucking dumbass. Stupid fucking noble idealistic kind-hearted dumbass.

• • • •

Outgoing Connection detected!

Initializing Connection Handoff to Interpretive Interface . . . Handoff Completed!

(Hey, Rhye, c'mere. I made you something.)

It's like floating in black static, and all the pressure is sitting on top of Rhye's head sumo-style, pushing her further down. Lines of code play across the insides of her eyes. Floaters are annoying; this is fucking maddening. And it *hurts.* She can't keep a straight thought, scalpels of pain are slicing through her brain over and over and she fucking hates this cyberspace bullshit. It's Rack's thing, not hers. Rhye likes her shit concrete. Rhye likes having a *body.* North, South, East, West. You use your feet to walk in a direction and then you shoot some motherfucker at the end of it. Finding Rack in here is gonna be like finding a seed in an elephant's ass, especially if he's tangled up with the security system. He had sounded scared shitless over the comm-link before that waste of jizz up top had done what he did. Thinking about it makes Rhye's currently non-existent asshole clench.

So. Find Rack, get him out of whatever pile he's stepped into, and also somehow free up the data their employers want. Piece of cake. No problem. As soon as Rhye figures out what form any of that is gonna take, how to move forward, and which fucking way forward *is,* she'll go ahead and do that. Should've paid more attention in school. Should've actually gone to school.

(It looks like a chip, a tiny little chunk of plastic and wire no bigger than a .22 shell. He drops it into her palm, looking like a cat that's just robbed a canary store at gunpoint. She glances down at the thing, then back at him, the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth and the pride in his eyes.)

(The hell is it?)

Establishing parietal operculum loopback . . . SUCCESS

Establishing posterior parietal cortex loopback . . . SUCCESS

Something about the script is nagging at Rhye. A memory half-clouded by booze, disinterest, and the obscuring fog of being so embarrassed by something she had willed her brain to forget all about it. Good god, had she actually *blushed?* Like a fucking schoolgirl with a Valentine?

Rhye never has been good at accepting kindness. Being loved

doesn't suit her.

(It's art. It's art and it's one-of-a-kind and it's all yours. It's an interface, like mine, but I cut out all the rendering hardware and installed a direct path to the somasensory cortices of your brain. You interpret the stimulus naturally, like poetry, or music, and — Rhye, there are no words for this. Here, hook yourself up to the test deck. Log in with me. You need to see for yourself.)

(Just say what it does in fuckin' English, Rack, baby.)

(It develops metaphors for abstract environments. I put it together just f —)

(Oh. Huh. Well, that's somethin'. You're a sharp motherfucker, Rack. You want a drink?)

And she had slotted the thing away in one of the ports beneath her hair so his feelings wouldn't be too hurt (not that she cared, of course) and turned away so he wouldn't see her blush (fuck) and promptly gotten herself so completely fucked up on the cheap whiskey they kept in the fridge that the rest of that night was an indistinct blur. That he had wanted her to plug in with him was not something she dwelled on, not something she had let herself dwell on. Fucking sentimentality. It was that sort of shit that got you killed.

But it sure as fuck seems to be coming in handy now, this little gift of Rack's. The static shudders and flashes and things begin taking shape. She has a body again, and guns, and she thanks her brain for that because she'd rather hop around in here on fucking stumps and hooks than be without some representation of her weapons. Another twist of the big empty and there's dirt beneath her boots, a gray sky above and a river ahead, and —

Enhanced local motor/sensory homunculi detected, offloading rendering tasks . . . complete!

Filling input buffer . . . 60% . . . 85% . . . 100%!

Rendering buffer contents . . .

Dead trees, dead grass, and a skeletal ferryman in a boat, cowled and waiting.

• • • •

Joining up with Rack hadn't stopped her from doing much of anything, at first. She played the part of the hired gun on whatever jobs he asked her to — beneath that quiet boy scout front was a

mercenary mind the criminal underworld would spread their cheeks and wallets for, if and when they needed his skills — but Rhye's time was her fucking time, and if she wanted to spend it getting blackout drunk or fighting in deathmatches until the street sweepers came out to mop up the hobo piss, that was none of his fucking concern. And, to Rack's credit, he never gave her any shit about it. He just bundled her into her bed when she came staggering home stinking of bourbon and sweat, sewed up her cuts and swabbed out her wounds, and watched. Always with the fucking watching.

Maybe she got a little reckless (more so than usual). Reckless or sloppy. The outcome was the same: She went into the ring with two good eyes to fight some knife-throwing motherfucker and came out a cyclops, blood and goo leaking from the sliced-up socket like candle wax. She's never been able to remember how the fuck she made it back to the apartment that night on her own. There's a big "scene missing" card and then she's perched on the bathroom counter while Rack dabs gently at the hole in her head, tight-lipped and trying so fucking hard not to let his concern show.

Neither of them says anything for a while. But a question is gnawing at Rhye, and she's drunk enough and light-headed enough from losing all that blood to finally just ask.

"Hey. Rack."

He wrings the washcloth out and a slaughterhouse swirls down the plughole. "Yeah?"

"Why the fuck do you care? About anything, I mean." She shakes her head. Bloody water and antiseptic splatter the walls. "You know what humans say about us? We're just fucking garbage to them. God created their ancestors, but ours were made by Tom, Dick, and motherfuckin' Turing. We don't have souls and they can just use us and throw us out" — she snaps her fingers, bang — "like that. Better than ruining a real person's hands in the factories, right? That kid on the assembly line, she's just a goddamned piece of synthetic trash, she doesn't dream about getting the hell out of the slums to somewhere better. So why give a fuck if that's all the world expects out of you?"

A beat. "Do you believe them?"

"Fuck no. For one thing, there's no such thing as their fucking God. Load of horseshit. The only things you can rely on are these babies." She pats her guns, solid and safe in their holsters. "But they

got one thing right. Our lives ain't worth shit in a sewer, and mine least of all. So I'll ask again: What's with the caring act? What's in it for you? You think you're gonna fix me or something?"

"No, Rhye. I don't think that."

"Then why? Why give a fuck?"

He shrugs, shooting her that wry little smile that never reaches his eyes.

"Hey," he says, finally. "Everybody needs a hobby, right?"

That was the last deathmatch Rhye ever fought in. She kept the empty socket, got an eyepatch, and aimed just as well with one eyeball as she ever had with two.

• • • •

She pays him in spent brass, the kind that gathers in your pockets and shirt cuffs after a day at the range or a night spent turning people into raw red meat. No reaper in Rhye's head would ever bother asking for fuckin' pennies. He stretches out a bony hand and the empty shells clatter into it like beer cans bouncing off a fence post, *ting ting ting.* Lead on, motherfucker, lead on. Down the river and through the woods and if the Big Bad Wolf jumps out, you give him a lead tampon in his pisshole before he can say *hey baby, what's shakin'.*

It looks like all the rivers and canals she's ever known, choked with old shopping trolleys and used condoms and rafts of yellow-brown foam. Styx by way of The City, stinking, oily-slow, full of shit and bodies and about as good a metaphor for life as you could find. The only difference here is that all of the faces beneath the water belong to people Rhye put there. She's not guilty — most of them deserved it — but it's still a little fucked up. They stare at her with accusing, fish-nibbled eyes. Some claw at the bottom of the boat. She doubts shooting them again would help anything, so she saves her bullets, lighting a cigarette instead. The smoke is warm and fuzzy inside her chest, comfortingly familiar, like sucking down a carcinogenic teddy bear.

"Do many of those fuckers get out?" she asks Reaper Man. She can be fuckin' polite, no problem. But Mr. Skullhead doesn't give her a second look, not even when she offers him a smoke (less out of kindness and more because she's curious to see how the hell something without lungs would manage the trick), so she scowls

and stares across the water with the coffin nail dangling moodily from her lips, chin in hand. To entertain herself she starts trying to identify every dead person she sees.

There are foot soldiers and foreign agents, low-level punks and pirates and even a police officer or two. Other bounty hunters. Cartel bosses. The kid that couldn't have been older than fifteen that tried to stick her up that one time, not recognizing Rhye for what she was. And yeah, even her first kill, the kiddy-diddling adoption agent with the wormy smile and the good-looking face. Nobody had suspected a goddamned thing. As long as they're good-looking, they never do. Who the fuck were they supposed to believe, the street rat skin-job with a rap sheet at age nine? It had been his blonde-haired, blue-eyed word against hers.

He wasn't fucking pretty with all that blood spurting out of his mouth, though, and he sure as fuck ain't looking too good now with half his chin rotted off. Real or not, it gives Rhye some satisfaction to see him stranded like a rat in the aftermath of a wrecked ship. She reaches down, avoiding the grasping hands. Her cigarette hisses and sizzles as it grinds into his bloated forehead. He sinks back into the water like one of those poor amusement park androids, stuck on a rail with a beam up their ass.

"Waste of a fucking cigarette," she says, and lights another. She actually feels kind of good after that, at least until she sees Rack's face down there too. The drag curdles behind her ribs and sticks like grime clotting a gun barrel.

He's not real. She knows that for a goddamned fact. But Rhye can't tear herself away from those sad eyes, the round hole dribbling black blood and river water down his nose. She watches him as they pull away, until the distance between them stretches and he's just another face in the crowd her hands have made.

• • • •

The river goes along, as rivers do, and then, out of fucking nowhere, like cockroaches circling the last can of cat food before a paycheck, suburban neighborhoods begin popping up along the banks. They stare down the bluffs with broken window eyes, yards gone to weeds and dog shit and strips of old paint. Who would have thought Hell had pink flamingos?

The ferryman lets Rhye out on a shore made of splintered bone

and more spent brass. Why the fuck he needed that shit for a toll when there are dunes of it lying within easy reach, Rhye doesn't know. She sets out for the houses without looking back. They'll meet up again soon enough for real, she figures. No need for handshakes when she'll be probably be back in the boat before her shelf life hits forty.

Keep moving. Keep searching. Wading through drifts of dead leaves and candy wrappers, glancing into doorways, further up and further in, uneasiness growing with each SLOW CHILDREN AT PLAY sign passed and bombed-out, rotten-tired station wagon peered under. Rust, dust, plaster, Styrofoam. Two-story brick hulks sagging at crazy angles, their multi-car garages gaping like slack-jawed drunks at a nudie bar. Shadows everywhere: beneath grimy windshields, in the alleyways, stacked thick behind brokeback venetian blinds. Rhye's been in friendlier combat zones; at least there you'll spot the occasional buzzard or scuttling cat.
She's being followed by *something,* but that's not surprising. A good sign: If she's suddenly interesting enough to be getting the hairy eyeball, maybe it's the security system crawling out from under its rock to do some territorial pissing. She puts up with the peeping for another couple of blocks, then stops in her tracks.

"Look. You wanna ask me to the fuckin' dance already instead of trying to peek up my skirts?"

Nothing. Not a big talker, her stalker.

"'Cause, y'know, if you're too chickenshit to give me an invitation, I'm just gonna go with the football captain, that motherfucker is *dreamy* and I hear he's got a dick like a goddamned science experiment."

Nada but tree shadows, all the way down the block. Nothing — and then, three or four houses down, a shape stepping out into the street. It stands there on the curb, watching quietly, silhouetted against the ashtray sky. The sharp, familiar scent of a lit cigarette punches through the stale air.

"Rhye? Is that you?"

But it's not the figure speaking to her. This voice comes from behind, one she's been wanting to hear ever since she plugged in. Her breath snags barbed wire. She half-turns to look back over her shoulder, against her better judgment.

"Holy shit, Rack! Where the fuck are you, man? I've been looking all over the place for you! Are y — "

“No, look, *look,* Rhye, you need to get out of here. You need to get out of here right now. I made a huge mistake, I underestimated the security protocol, and she’s going to come after you, too, if you don’t go. Don’t worry about me. Rhye?”

The shadowy shape is walking towards her. Rhye’s pretty sure it’s not out selling cookies or spreading the word of the Lord. “That’s assuming I know how to fucking get out of here without you, man,” she says. Her hands are already on her guns. “And what the fuck do you mean by *she?”*

The purposeful walk has turned into a wolf-trot. The light still isn’t great, but she can see now that it’s a girl. About her height, about her build, same hair color, same way of moving —

Wait. Wait just one fucking minute.

“Rack? This security program. I’m just, like, seeing my subconscious or some bullshit again, right? Right?” The other woman is running now. “Because if you’ve done what I think you did — ”

“I, uh . . .”

Mother*fucker*.

“. . . I may have cribbed heavily from existing source material, yes.”

The woman grins as she sprints. Still has both of her eyes. Four years ago, maybe? A copy of her at her most bitter and burned out, thirsty for blood and not caring whose.

“Let’s do this, then,” she says, sighing, and then there’s no time for talk anymore.

• • • •

So there’s this skin-job kid that gets adopted by one of those high muckity-muck Ganymede mobsters. He isn’t exceptionally bright and he sure as hell ain’t a looker, but Don Whoeverthefuck has a bug up his ass ’cause his biological clock is tick-tick-ticking away like a block of C4 is tenderly bearhugging his testicles. Old fart needs an heir. All those years of pushing baby carriages into traffic ain’t gonna count for shit if he doesn’t have an heir to pick up the slack when his heart valves do their last dance with the extra-lard pork belly. He throws some money around, which is how he’s solved every other problem in his bloated life, and hey voila, instant son. The boy is dumber than a sack of skullfucked squirrels, but that

just makes him fit in with all the real Mafioso squirts that came from ballsacks and bad decisions.

Things go on swingin' as they usually do. Little Johnny Electronuts gets in his share of trouble, but Daddy is always there to yank his ass out of the fire with greased palms or greased dicks or a carefully administered dose of goon muscle to somebody's knees and groin. Then, one day, kiddo gets the idea that he's some kind of fucking hacker. He's nineteen and he's better protected than the Virgin Mary's holy of holies and he's got a chip on his shoulder and a hard-on in his lucky rocketship underoos just crying to fuck something up. He tries to bust his way into a rival family's black box so he can crow about it to all his knuckle-dragging script kid buddies. This is what is known in the business as a Giant Fucking Mistake, 'cause the security system in this motherfucker was set up by another motherfucker by the name of Rack, and Rack is a goddamned super genius when it comes to that sort of thing. It grabs the kid by the short hairs almost as soon as he plugs in and slams the door behind him, and when the Don's cavalry comes busting in to save his ass, their nuts land squarely in a bear trap. His consciousness is all locked up like a gold bar inside a treasure chest. They've got the box, but nobody seems to be able to get through to the toy inside.

Nobody but the motherfucker who designed the system in the first place, that is. They offer him money. They offer him a lot of money. And less because of the money and more because he likes a challenge, Rack bites.

And that's where things get fucked up.

• • • •

Dodge for dodge and feint for feint and bullet for bullet they come together, the woman that was and the woman that is. The Not-Rhye is laughing like a kid at the circus as she spins her hand-cannons, laughing and twisting and breathing in that gunsmoke that turns your snot black like she's a barracuda and it's seawater. She doesn't give a shit whether she lives or dies and Rhye knows this because it used to be *her,* and she suddenly realizes, with something like shock and something like mild disgust, that this is no longer a truth that applies. Something inside Rhye wants to make it out alive, wants to go home to the shitty-ass flat with the

bullet holes in the air conditioner, wants to taste bourbon and cigarettes and go right on living alongside that dumbfuck brainiac like she has every day for the past five years. Dangerous. Very dangerous. The moment you start wanting is the moment you slow down. And the moment you slow down —

Not-Rhye lands close enough that Rhye can smell the burning wire and ozone stink of her over the reek of cordite and hot metal. She flicks one of the pistols like a gecko lapping up a mosquito and it coughs emphysema and tuberculosis and Rhye's cheek is laid open to the bone even as she rolls behind a row of trash cans, ears ringing like pulled fire alarms. She's a fucking idiot. She should've been scrapped at construction. She's going to die here, soft and stupid as a human cop, and Rack is going to be trapped inside this box forever. The mobsters are going to be fucking pissed when nobody comes back. Good. Fuck 'em, and fuck their wives and moms and childhood pets for good measure.

"Were you trying to hit me, or did one of those pink flamingos do something to piss you off?" she says. If she can irritate Not-Rhye into making a mistake she might have a chance. Anything is worth a shot. "The neighbors are gonna talk, y'know."

No response. Too smart for her own good. God *damn* she wishes Rack had held a less flattering view of her when he programmed this fucker. "Oh well. We'd have made shitty Home Owners Association members anyway. Rack! You alright?"

"I think so. I wasn't exactly expecting this to happen when I went in. I thought — "

"That was your first fuckin' mistake, Rack baby. You do too much of that anyway." She rubs her blistered, lead-stained fingers clean on her cargo pants and digs for a fresh magazine. "Is there any way for me to disable her easier than giving her brain airholes?"

You could hear a gnat fart in the pause that follows.

"Rack, say something before I come over there and do some kinky shit to your ass with this gun barrel, please."

". . . I don't know," he says. "I think I can do it, but you'll have to free me up first."

"Fuck a row of baby ducks, is that all? Lemme send Little Miss Red Rover a fuckin' engraved invitation to move her psycho ass to a new neighborhood and I'll be right over with a bundt cake and a goddamned meat loaf."

But she's already tensing to spring back into the line of fire, because of course she is.

Up and at 'em, knocking the bins over clitter-clatter like a fuckball of feral cats, and sure enough there's her shadow racing to greet her, four years younger, one eye richer, and meaner than a limp-dicked drill sergeant. No time to fire off a good shot; she says *fuck it* and goes ahead and launches herself straight into the other woman's knees and down the two of them tumble in a muddy heap of fists and flailing motorcycle boots like a pair of overturned shot glasses, the world reduced to rubber soles squeegeeing shins and knuckles glancing off grittywet concrete. Rack's yelling something. Little-known fact, though: It's pretty fucking hard to focus on anything but the task at hand when the task is trying to club your teeth out with the handshake-end of a pistol. She dodges the blow and it glances off her temple instead with a hollow *thwonk*. Gasoline stars and flat-tire sparks shimmy-shake across her vision.

No fucking way I'm blacking out. Her bone-sickle grin hangs overhead, the last thing so many other unlucky motherfuckers have seen at the end of a fight. Rhye focuses on that sliver, wills the darkness back with clenched fists and a gas leak hiss. The thing with her smile is still laughing, but it's not some kind of mad villain cackle. She sounds like she's having the time of her life.

"What the fuck are you laughin' at, dumbshit? See something funny?" Not the wittiest thing to ever rasp its way out of her nicotine box, but whatever. Wit's the first thing to go when you've just gotten pistolwhipped in the side of the head so hard your brain thinks it's being skullfucked to death by a rhinoceros. The grip comes down again, misses her by an asshair, and judo-chops the pavement so that little bits of gravel spray up like buckshot.

If the girl-slash-security-system-that-was-her is sharp and not a dumbfuck, she'll use these precious seconds to turn her guns around and shoot Rhye in the face, like she's wishing she had just done herself. But oh, glory of glories, blessed be the almighty fuckin' cockiness of youth. This little asshole right here — with her two dead eyes and her don't-need-nobody jock walk — curls her lip back in an *are you fuckin' serious* sneer and swallows the bait deep.

"Aw, come the fuck *on,* man!" she crows. "You can't fuckin' tell me the thought of actually going up against somebody who can give you a fair fight isn't gettin' you all tingly in your grandma-bloomers! Why the hell else would you come here? For *him?* Fuck's

sake, I'm you, aren't I? You live for sweat running under your tits and blood splattering your face, not some soft-hearted fuckhead can't tell which way a magazine loads."

Is that what he thinks I thought? Shit. *There's* a nasty little spoonful of glass to chew on. No time for guilt, though.

"You got one part of that right, sister," she says, and jams her thumb into the girl's left eyeball. It's all executed in one smooth motion: jabtwistpull. And then she's rolling across the wet ribbon of tarmac while her not-self flails and shrieks gurgling stray cat curses, rolling and back on her feet and bringing up her guns to make an end of this, but even in a considerable amount of pain the other her is fast in an unnatural, make-the-flesh-of-your-ears-crinkle sort of way, slither-snarling back beneath the rainy evening's skirts before Rhye can give the triggers a good hard prom-night fingering. She starts to go after her, blood boiling.

Y'know what? A little voice in her head, the one that sometimes says things like *are you sure getting into that gimp's windowless white van is a good idea?* or *maybe we should go get that festering bullet hole checked out,* or, of late, *don't punch Rack in the face, the poor bastard hasn't done anything to deserve it this time.* In other words, her inner killjoy.

What?

Fuck pride, man.

And just what is that supposed to mean, exactly?

Pride is for jackoffs who aren't being hunted from the fucking shadows.

"Shut the hell up." She says this aloud in a hissed whisper; hopefully the security system will laugh herself to death at Rhye having a conversation with her invisible friend and that'll be that. "We're fine. I can do this by myself. I don't care what Rack says."

Pride is for people who don't have other people depending on them . . .

Rhye snaps to a halt like the bullet she's been expecting just drilled her brain a peephole.

. . . So why don't you try trusting your partner for goddamned once and get over there like he asked? Remember what we're here for.

"Go fuck your own ass with a fish-hook dildo." Her shoulders are slumping before she's halfway through the word "fuck." By the time she reaches "dildo" she's made a u-turn and is vaulting the sagging picket fence that separates her from the back-alley leading to Rack,

feet *thwap-thwap-thwapping* the blacktop. She listens for the echo of a pursuit, but all she can hear is Rack's voice reeling her in and her own one-woman ticker-tape parade careening down the path.

Warm. Warmer. Red-hot, veering back off the pavement, crashing through briars and dead weeds and old tires like she's back in basic, up and over another splintered, gap-slatted privacy fence as weather-worn as a beer can in the ditch. It's not a pretty postcard that greets her — more weeds, more broken glass, a swimming pool filled with water the color and consistency of baby shit. Rack is there, though, tied up on the patio, and that qualifies it for Garden of the Fucking Century, so far as Rhye's concerned. She's down and off her perch and across the yard before she can remember to lazily saunter in like she doesn't give a fuck.

His face is a bloodied bedsheet, haunted eyes staring out from behind the bruises and stubble. Rhye wipes the blood from his split lip and they exchange a quick *you cool?* glance before she sets to work on the knotted ropes. It's not some romantic, lovey-dovey, kiss your boo-boos BS; it's just the kind of thing good partners do for one another.

"Been playing in Mommy's bondage closet again, Rack-baby?" *Tsk-tsk.* "You got a lotta 'splaining to do if we get out of here alive, my friend." She spares him another look from under her cocked brow, trying to keep it cool and even, wanting him to maybe twist in the wind a little. His expression is all thousand-yard stare and nervous bird herk-jerk, sheepishness and syrupy adoration. Portrait of The Nebbish As Grateful Penitent. He looks like he stuck his hand down a secretary's panties at the office holiday party, got a handful of tentacles for his troubles, and wanted her all the more for it after that initial moment of cold water surprise. "For now, though," she finishes, after re-locating her tongue and remembering how to use it, "we need to figure out a way to clean up this goddamned mess. No, sorry, my bad: *Your* goddamned mess, 'cause I sure as shit don't remember giving you permission to turn my personality into a fucking security module. Can you see me? You're lookin' right at me, so I'm pretty sure you can see me."

"We synced up as soon as you stepped into the area," he says. "The chip, you know?" Rhye finally snake-charms the ropes into giving way and he pulls his hands free, rubbing each wrist gingerly. You could take fingerprints with the tired smudges beneath his eyes. "I always wanted the interfaces to work together. Yours is

one-of-a-kind, but I gave mine a tweak, so — OW! What the heck was that for?"

"It's lucky for you that we're friends, asshole. Anybody else pulled some shit like this and I wouldn't just sock 'em in the ear. How's this gonna go down? Talk quick. She's way too quiet right now and I have *no* idea how long that's going to last."

"It's . . . tricky."

"Tricky? What exactly do you mean by 'tricky'? Did you or didn't you say you could disable that fucking thing if I got you free?"

"I did say that, yes." Rack stretches the last word out until it wobbles, full of more quivering "but" than a strip club. "I can give you a kill switch. Implementing it may require a little footwork, though, and I'm not sure how that will play out, considering our . . . environment." He waves a hand to take in the garden, runs the other through his hair, and ends up looking like an insomniac hedgehog.

"Well, considering our only other option is getting bullet-fucked to death by a pissed-off, admittedly foxy-fine bit of code, I'm open to anything. What do I need to do?"

"We'll need to execute two operations at the same time, and even then it doesn't have a 100% chance of working. I hadn't allowed for this. I can be sort of an idiot sometimes, as you are probably aware."

Seeing him slumped there staring at his hands feels like defeat, and she'll be fucked if she gives up that easily after coming this far. She punches him in the shoulder. "Hey, none of that sadsack shit. You fucked up. Everybody does. If you're gonna wallow in it, I might as well've left you up there with your brains as pretty pink wallpaper. What the fuck will trying hurt, right?"

And that gets a slow, crooked half-smile out of him, which is all she really wants right now. It's like her heart just snorted a line. "You're right, of course," he says.

"Goddamned right I am." She offers him her hand. "C'mon. Let's do this thing."

Their palms meet with an awesome partnerly *slap*.

Now, this is where Rhye expects him to pull something cool out of his pockets — a couple of little red buttons, maybe, or a bundle of dynamite. Instead, he blanches. His hands fly up to his throat in the universal *oh shit, I'm choking* gesture. For a horrible fistful of seconds she thinks she's going to have to do the Heimlich (and how

the fuck does that work, anyway? Is that the move where you grab the other person from behind and give them a rough humping?) but thankfully he shakes whatever's in his throat loose on his own. Something small and heavy bounces off the toe of Rhye's boot. Another, like a fat brass raindrop.

She reaches down and carefully picks up two 9mm bullets, bright as change in a gutter.

Rack peers down at the lumps of lead and metal he just hairball-horked onto her boots. If he wore glasses she just knows he'd be adjusting the fucking things for a better look. "Huh. I guess it makes sense that they would take this form."

"So these are, what, special? Magic bullets?" They *feel* like normal rounds. They even smell like 'em, which is to say, metallic. She rolls them between her fingers, warm from the heat of her hand. "Kill switches, whatever the fuck you called 'em?"

"Correct. Ideally you'll discharge both simultaneously, shutting down the security system completely."

There are pros and cons to knowing somebody — *really* knowing somebody, how their face looks when they cry or come or drool in their sleep. Rhye understands what Rack means immediately: *You're the fighter, you're strong, so of course you'll take care of this on your own.* She could say no. She could open up her chest with a scalpel and let him see the tender bits — *I can't do this alone, she's too good and I care too much and quite frankly I'm scared shitless, for you and for me* — or she could tell him, hey, clean up your own goddamned mess, I ain't your fuckin' nanny.

But she knows how this has to go down, truthfully, and it doesn't involve telling Rack to piss up a rope. She'll save that for a later date. Instead, before she can second-guess her decision, she pulls one of her pistols, ejects the magazine, thumbs one of the kill switches inside, and shoves it into his hands. There. Done.

Rack stares down at her sweet, lethal baby like she's just handed him a dead cat.

"She won't be expecting you to have one of my guns," she says, by way of explanation. Her voice is hoarse. Chopping off one of her hands would've been easier, if less useful. "I sure as hell wouldn't, if I were her. Safety's off and it's ready to go; all you gotta do is point and pull. Careful your thumbs aren't behind the slide, unless you wanna get bit."

Does he understand what this is costing her? In pride, in trust, in

all of that stupid emotional stuff? He looks back up at her — stunned doesn't begin to describe the expression on his face — and his eyes are wet and glassy.

"Rhye . . . I can't . . ."

Yeah. He knows.

"Aw, hell. Don't go getting all wet cereal on me, man," she mutters. Making sure her remaining pistol is loaded and racked suddenly becomes very, very important. "Just make sure you're close when you fire, alright? I don't — "

(Pop)

Of course Miss Security doesn't come over the fence; why would she bother? The only warning is that soft, sudden *pop,* like a blood bubble bursting on a dying man's lips, and there she stands, herniated out of the nothing because oh right, she *is* the fucking nothing. Rhye has just enough time to grasp that they've been played and just enough time to push Rack down and back and no time at all to do anything else but brace for impact as Not-Rhye slams into her and they take a backwards trust exercise straight into the pool.

It's in her nose and her ears and her eye socket and it's *warm,* which is somehow the worst part. A warm green slurry pressing against her skin, turning everything to frogs and fungus and body temperature pea soup. Fingers scratching at her throat and her one good eye, looking to throttle or blind or both. Spots wriggling tadpole trails across her vision. She pushes out in slow motion, catches her attacker in the chest, tries using the momentum to pull away. No dice; it's like karate-kicking an amped-up octopus. They sink deeper, the light fading to darkness, seconds rubber-banding to grim, doubtful decades.

And this is what I'll get for trusting Rack with my back. Should've gone with my instincts. Trust fucks you. It fucks you every time and puts a knife in your windpipe while it's at it. Lungs already beginning to ache. Can't grab for her gun, 'cause both her hands are busy keeping Not-Rhye at bay. *Nobody'll come to save you, idiot. Or if he does, he'll get here about ten seconds too late. Let this be your final lesson about going home with strangers.*

The security program's good eye glitters in the gloom, black and triumphant. *Gotcha, you fucker,* it says, and it's the language of sharks she's speaking now, no mewling monkey noises needed. *Don't even have to waste a bullet.* She leans closer (Rhye has a sudden

nightmare flash of her opening her mouth to show double-rows of pointed teeth, all the way back to the place where her jaw hinges), eager to choke, to rub out, to self-destruct. Rhye would keep fighting but there's seven feet of scummy water overhead and a tangle of grasping limbs dragging her further downward and god fucking *damn* she's tired. She can't even spit in her rival's face.

It is at this perfect moment of physical and emotional exhaustion, with her arms pulling the fire alarms and her legs turning to full clips of concrete, that Rack chooses to dive into their underwater cockfight, like a toaster hurled slots-down into a bathtub. He arrives with a muffled splash, churning up bubbles, froth, muck from the bottom, algae from the surface. Now it's Not-Rhye's turn to be surprised. She spins around to face this new threat

(occupied she's not paying attention to me my hands are free)

lip curled, shoulders hunched, NOT a happy camper, she thought this was gonna be a one-on-one and turns out it's a threesome. She's all over his shit faster than you can say *piranhas in the kiddie pool.*

(and now the grip's solid in my hand it'll fire it'll kill if we're close enough I believe in you baby air air AIR)

The water's a whirlpool of bodies and spume. Rhye is dying by inches now; another half minute and her lungs will burst. But not before she does what she came here to do. She pulls that heavy, heavy gun up, the weight of a lead cannon in her hands. She waits for visibility to clear. And when the bubbles finally part and Rack's eyes meet hers

(she's got her hands around his throat but he's letting her so calmly and she'll never notice the pistol kissing the underside of her jaw until it's too late)

she shoves the muzzle of the 9mm snugly against Not-Rhye's back and sends a prayer to Lady Luck, that goddess all gunslingers kneel to.

Rack and Rhye squeeze the triggers as one, the way good partners do.

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They find the kid balled up in a basement jail cell, groaning and bitching about his head. It looks an awful lot like the one Rhye spent her formative years gracing, but Christ knows what the kid sees. Good looking, late teens, perfect teeth and hair and body

model. There's something wrong with the expression, though. Even confused and fucked up in the middle of a strange system he's sneering an entitled sneer that makes Rhye's fists curl like dead spiders beneath a radiator. *I always get what I want,* it says. *Why wouldn't the world bend over and give it to me?*

"Sorry about the wait," Rack says. "Ran into a little trouble." He fumbles in his pocket for a key. "Doing alright?"

The kid's eyes dart wildly. "A little trouble?" he says. "You call this a *little* trouble? I can't fucking move and you think that's a little trouble, fuckface? Suck *both* of my balls, man. Hey! Hel-*lo?* Are you still there? Are you listening to me?"

Rack doesn't look up, just calmly keeps on doing what he's doing. Rhye can feel her molars grinding together. "Rack, can you hurry it the fuck along? I don't know how much longer I can put up with this shit, get what I'm saying?"

"Absolutely." A click and the door to the cell swings open. Rack steps back and nods at the kid, so irritatingly professional Rhye can hardly stand it. "Someone will be by to collect you shortly, I believe," he says. "Your body is waiting outside."

"Goddamned right it is, you no-nuts bitch."

"Kid, you talk to him like that one more time and I'm going to blow both the balls you're so proud of off in a place where they ain't pretend and don't grow back, fuckin' got it? I don't care who your daddy is." Rhye can feel a headache gathering behind her eyes. Time to get the hell out of here and go the fuck home. Her mattress is calling. "C'mon Rack, let's go. Compress your ass. My headspace isn't what you'd call flying first class, but it's better than the company in here."

There's a sound like bacon hitting a skillet, loud enough that the kid's bitching is blessedly drowned out. A glowing door pops up at the end of the row of cells. She's gotta hand it to Rack, he's nothing short of a goddamned wizard when he's free inside a program. Rhye grabs his hand and gleefully sets off for the exit, feeling more cheerful than she has all day. A little nervous about letting Rack piggyback inside her melon, maybe — there's shit in there she doesn't want anyone poking at, even her partner — but mostly too relieved at having him back to care. He lets her pull him along. Doesn't say a word, just smiles and follows, tie flapping like a pirate's banner in the weird wind pushing from the entryway.

The light from the door is the cold, flickering white of a

fluorescent bulb burning in an abandoned department store. They stand there staring into the static for what seems like ages. She doesn't let go of his hand. He doesn't let go of hers. Rhye wonders if it'll hurt, or feel weird, or if she'll be the same once it's done with. She sucks in a breath. Now or never, woman. Leave it to Rack to wait for a second fucking invitation.

"Well?" she says. "You waiting for me to buy you a ring or what?"

And that's when she finally catches the look in his eyes, the sadness of the little smile quirking the corner of his mouth like a fishhook. She knows that fucking expression. She *hates* that fucking expression. He's not telling her something, and that something is going to sting.

"Rack?" she says.

"Rhye. It doesn't work that easily. I can't just compress myself without a console and a body to work the console. That's beyond my capabilities."

For once, Rhye is at a total loss for words. She gapes at him, mouth hanging open like a second useless asshole. It takes a full minute for her to push anything out. "Bullshit," she manages. "Stop fucking around. You're some sort of goddamned superhero in here. You unlock things, you make doors, you *designed* this motherfucker. There's nothing you can't do." Panic creeping up her spine with tiny naked rat feet. Can't shoot her way out of this one. "There's gotta be something. A trick, or a program, or — "

His voice is infuriatingly gentle. "Without a body? Compression is tricky. If I did it wrong, even assuming I could from inside a system like this, one of us could get hurt. You could be erased. That's not a risk I'm willing to take."

"Okay, fine. I'll come back, then. I'll get you a new body and come back." He's slowly shaking his head even as she says it and Rhye's pissed, at circumstance and the mobsters and Rack and everything that hops, crawls, or breathes on this godforsaken planet. "I'm not leaving you here, you colossal fuckhead. Do you KNOW what I've gone through to fetch you out of this box?"

"Once they've pulled the kid, do you really think they're going to let you back in for me? They'll erase everything on here just to teach their rivals a lesson." He sighs. "Look. There's a locker in Brickton. The combi — "

"Fuck your money, Rack. And fuck you, too. Did you not hear me

the first time?" *Stop looking at me that way stop looking at me that way stop looking at me that way.* Her heart is clawing its way through her sternum like a bum plowing through a back alley trash bin. She's got him by the tie, hands shaking, throat aching. "Take the risk," she says. "Do it." And then: *"Please."*

"I can't. I'm sorry."

They're nose to nose and forehead to forehead and now it's Rhye who's shaking her head. She can see a way out and she knows he won't agree to it, but fuck him and fuck a world without him, that's not a decision he gets to make. "No," she says. "No. You ever hear anything about those old ships people used to sail? Protocol for wrecks and all that shit?"

His brow furrows into confused little wrinkles. She'll miss that. She'll miss a lot of things about him. "What does . . ."

"I'm tying your ass to the mast. You've got no say in this, Rack. When you get done with my body, put it through a woodchipper or something, all right?"

Rhye's push carries him over the threshold and into the white before the stubborn asshole has a chance to argue. His tie stays wrapped around her fingers, fluttering the goodbye she couldn't bring herself to say.

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Unlike his partner, he's not prone to bouts of rage and profanity. She explodes all over the place at intervals you can almost set clock hands to, like a geyser or a volcano or some other natural phenomenon. Beautiful to see, if potentially life-threatening to anybody within close range. Rack, though? Rack's different. If Rhye is Old Faithful, Rack is a glacier: cool-headed, steady, and inevitable. Excesses of emotion do not become him.

When he comes to inside her body, the first word that bursts in his head, like a soap bubble giving up the ghost, is **SHIT.** A great big neon **SHIT,** all four letters glowing the lurid red of a 3 a.m. traffic light on a stretch of empty road.

The dimly lit warehouse is full of equally dim goons. Six of them are alive. There were seven when he plugged in, but that dark smear on the concrete floor suggests Rhye's been engaged in some basic subtraction since then. All of them remain armed and extremely twitchy. A roomful of semiautomatic-carrying cats in a

rocking chair factory, ready to pop off if so much as a moth flutters near one of the grimy windows. Rack knows how trigger-happy they can be; the slumped cicada's shell of his body in the corner is testimony enough, if any were needed. The big boss's foot is tapping out a patent-leather Morse code that, roughly translated, probably comes to something very impatient and vaguely threatening.

The Kid's still stretched out on his hospital gurney, dead to the world. The mess of wires and cords connecting him to the black box on the desk makes Rack think of a kitten hopelessly entangled in a ball of yarn. A scruffy, obnoxious kitten, in desperate and immediate need of drowning. Rack would be happy to oblige — there's an unfamiliar emotion that came along with the big neon **SHIT;** he's reasonably sure it's cold anger building towards fury — but all eyes are on him.

"Done?" Big Boss sounds like a side of beef being dragged down backcountry gravel. Rhye's eyepatch splits him into dual hemispheres, the seen and the unseen. Disorienting enough suddenly being in a new body — *her* body, no less, with a mysteriously bloody nose — without adding visual impairment to the mix.

"Yeah," Rack says, only it comes out in Rhye's voice, and that (as she would say) is a whole dump truck of *what the fucking fuck* landing on his senses. "All yours, Chief. You gonna send your tech in to collect Junior's code so I can get the hec — fuck out of here already?"

A sharp, all too familiar *click* from the dark side of the mook. Ten to one it's not a wedding band he's holding in his unseen hand. "You will be doing this as well. Seeing as how you felt the need to — what are the words? — earlier retirement my computer-man." He nudges the shiny toe of one shoe at the stain on the concrete.

Oh, Rhye. How would you have gotten out of this one? You couldn't access a code for brine in the middle of the ocean. He's neck-deep in a slurry of anger, frustration, fear, and love. So much for his much-lauded control. The valve is broken, the water rising.

"Sure," he says, after another long, soupy moment.

Because Rack is not entirely human, he can see all the possible ways this lock might turn. A shootout. A hostage situation. Piles of dead mobsters, lakes of blood, the hard-bitten damsel in the box safe and saved and — could it be? — possibly even grateful. Reach

out and twist the meaty wrist. Hear that satisfying snap of bone like a cheap plastic chair leg bending the wrong way, a metallic clatter as gun and floor slug it out. Be an action hero. Take the shot. Use her body like the weapon it is.

Rack's not big on weapons or violence. Before today, he'd never fired a pistol or snapped a man's wrist. Rhye, as she would quickly tell you, is no fuckin' damsel, nor is she any person's gun but her own. Trying to use her would inevitably blow up in their faces like a cartoon birthday cake studded with sticks of dynamite. Instead — gods of gratuitous violence and swaggering machismo be good — Rack spins the tires of his mind until they throw twin rooster-tails of oily muck. Trigger-bitten fingers tango across the keyboard, coding a different future. He may not be any good at murdering mobsters, but he's a goddamned pro at killing time.

I hope I'm doing the right thing.

The problem with making *any* move, of course, is that you never know what the outcome will be until the chips have fallen, even if you've got a brain manufactured in a factory crèche and a childhood's worth of experience cheating card sharks out of their greasy retirement funds. A guess, however educated, is still a guess. A white-collar criminal adjusts his tie in the heart of the City (because it's goddamned hot and the AC's gone out and there's nothing to drink but rye whiskey and if his partner sheds one more article of clothing he's going to go outside and club his crotch to death with a loose brick) and a tenement flat 300 miles away collapses into rubble and rebar and a bloody jigsaw of limbs. At the long, dark end of things, hoping for the best is all you've got. Rack breathes out letters and numerals and hope through their fingertips, *clickity-clickity-clack.* The screen fills up with green and black.

The Kid twitches on his slab.

He's Frankenstein. He's a zombie pumped full of chemicals. He's a greasy-haired son of a bitch with a face no factory in its right mind would take credit for, sitting upright on his bed at the cost of the only person Rack's ever loved. Every head in the joint swivels to watch him as he blinks and gapes. Is it man, machine, or goldfish? Rack feels something heave in the direction of his *(her)* stomach, like a wet dog giving itself a shake. *Keep it together, boy-o. For her. For both of you.*

Big Boss, like everybody else, seems too stunned by the sight to even give the Kid a hand. He stares at his beloved progeny as if the

boy's just sprouted a pair of assholes where his ears should be.

"Son," he says. A slow, joyous smile creeps up the coffin length of his face, hands-down one of the most disturbing things Rack's ever seen. "Son! How are you feeling, my darling boy?"

No response from the Kid. His legs are dangling over the side of the gurney now. The pearl-handled grips of the big expensive pistols strapped to his sides play peek-a-boo beneath the fabric of his coat, dancing in and out of Rack's limited line of sight. Show-off guns, Rhye had scoffed when she first saw them. Kiddo probably had a prick like a bedbug and the aim of one of those drunken seven-year-olds that used to hang out behind the apartment dumpsters.

Even with Rhye's less-than-charitable assessment of the punk's skills ringing in his memory, there's something about the pistols that keeps dragging Rack's eye back. He watches them and he watches them good, holding his breath.

Trailing wires, head down, the Kid lurches to his feet. His daddy's goon squad unfreezes and rushes to catch him before his delicate ass can hit the floor and catch a bruise. He shrugs off their hands; the gentleman will be seeing himself out, thank you. With precarious, rubbery grace — the kind baby animals and drunks possess in spades, the kind no sober adult has ever been able to accurately mimic — he pulls himself upright, takes a step forward, and lifts his head to get a better look at his surroundings. He scans the room, expression becoming more and more confused. Takes it all in — mobsters, brick walls, bare bulbs, bloodstains — and finally reaches Rack, at which point his brow ceases to furrow and begins sinking a mine shaft to his frontal lobe.

"Wait," he says. "What the fucking fuck? Rack? What in the fucking piss just happ — Oh." A light bulb flickers behind his eyes. Scratch that; it's more like someone throwing the breaker on an entire row of houses. *"OH."* He pats his sides like a man looking for his keys. He finds the twin lumps nestled beneath his armpits. He takes a peek under the coat — just to make sure they're not vibrators or candy bars or bibles — and then he looks back up at Rack, grinning a slow, impossibly wide cartoon shark's grin.

"You son of a motherfucker," he says, admiringly.

Rack knows that grin. Even on someone else's face, he knows it. His heart bucks around so wildly he's afraid he might black out. And then he's suddenly locked in a kiss — she's fast, never mind the

unfamiliar body — and the weirdness of the situation isn't even registering for either of them, it's all adrenaline and relief and a sort of drunken, invincible glee. There's greasy hair in his good eye and stubble against his lips. She tastes like a chain-smoking asshole that just underwent a malt liquor enema. Fucking perfection.

And now she's pulling away, yanking those pearly white grips out of their sockets like a dentist riding a meth binge, and the Ganymede crew never even knows what's hit it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Bolander is a chaos-sowing trickster girl of indeterminate employment, half-tornado, half-writer. Originally from the deepest, darkest regions of the southern US, she attended the University of Leicester from 2004 to 2007, studying History and Archaeology, and is a graduate of the 2011 Clarion Writers' Workshop at UCSD. She enjoys loud music, peaty scotch, drawings that move, and anything pumpkin-flavored you might happen to have on hand. Her short fiction has previously appeared in *Reflection's Edge, Strange Horizons,* and *Lightspeed.*

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

Buffalo

John Kessel

In April of 1934, H. G. Wells traveled to the United States, where he visited Washington, D.C. and met with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Wells, sixty-eight years old, hoped the New Deal might herald a revolutionary change in the U.S. economy, a step forward in an "Open Conspiracy" of rational thinkers that would culminate in a world socialist state. For forty years he'd subordinated every scrap of his artistic ambition to promoting this vision. But by 1934, Wells's optimism, along with his energy for saving the world, was waning.

While in Washington, he asked to see something of the new social welfare agencies, and Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Interior Secretary, arranged for Wells to visit a Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Fort Hunt, Virginia.

It happens that at that time my father was a CCC member at that camp. From his boyhood he had been a reader of adventure stories; he was a big fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and of H. G. Wells. This is the story of their encounter, which never took place.

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In Buffalo, it's cold, but here the trees are in bloom, the mockingbirds sing in the mornings, and the sweat the men work up clearing brush, planting dogwoods, and cutting roads is wafted away by warm breeze. Two hundred of them live in the Fort Hunt barracks high on the bluff above the Virginia side of the Potomac. They wear surplus army uniforms. In the morning, after a breakfast of grits, Sgt. Sauter musters them up in the parade yard, they climb onto trucks, and are driven by forest service men out to wherever they're to work that day.

For several weeks Kessel's squad has been working along the river road, clearing rest stops and turnarounds. The tall pines have shallow root systems, and spring rain has softened the earth to the point where wind is forever knocking trees across the road. While

most of the men work on the ground, a couple are sent up to cut off the tops of the pines adjoining the road, so if they do fall, they won't block it. Most of the men claim to be afraid of heights. Kessel isn't. A year or two ago, back in Michigan, he worked in a logging camp. It's hard work, but he is used to hard work. And at least he's out of Buffalo.

The truck rumbles and jounces out the river road that's going to be the George Washington Memorial Parkway in our time, once the WPA project that will build it gets started. The humid air is cool now, but it will be hot again today, in the eighties. A couple of the guys get into a debate about whether the feds will ever catch Dillinger. Some others talk women. They're planning to go into Washington on the weekend and check out the dance halls. Kessel likes to dance; he's a good dancer. The fox trot, the lindy hop. When he gets drunk, he likes to sing, and has a ready wit. He talks a lot more, kids the girls.

When they get to the site, the foreman sets most of the men to work clearing the roadside for a scenic overlook. Kessel straps on a climbing belt, takes an axe, and climbs his first tree. The first twenty feet are limbless, then climbing gets trickier. He looks down only enough to estimate when he's gotten high enough. He sets himself, cleats biting into the shoulder of a lower limb, and chops away at the road side of the trunk. There's a trick to cutting the top so that it falls the right way. When he's got it ready to go, he calls down to warn the men below. Then a few quick bites of the axe on the opposite side of the cut, a shove, a crack, and the top starts to go. He braces his legs, ducks his head and grips the trunk. The treetop skids off and the bole of the pine waves ponderously back and forth, with Kessel swinging at its end like an ant on a metronome. After the pine stops swinging, he shinnies down and climbs the next tree.

He's good at this work, efficient, careful. He's not a particularly strong man — slender, not burly — but even in his youth he shows the attention to detail that, as a boy, I remember seeing when he built our house.

The squad works through the morning, then breaks for lunch from the mess truck. The men are always complaining about the food and how there isn't enough of it, but until recently a lot of them were living in Hoovervilles — shack cities — and eating nothing at all. As they're eating, a couple of the guys rag Kessel for

working too fast. “What do you expect from a Yankee?” one of the southern boys says.

“He ain’t a Yankee. He’s a Polack.”

Kessel tries to ignore them.

“Whyn’t you lay off him, Turkel?” says Cole, one of Kessel’s buddies.

Turkel is a big blond guy from Chicago. Some say he joined the CCCs to duck an armed robbery rap. “He works too hard,” Turkel says. “He makes us look bad.”

“Don’t have to work much to make you look bad, Lou,” Cole says. The others laugh, and Kessel appreciates it. “Give Jack some credit. At least he had enough sense to come down out of Buffalo.” More laughter.

“There’s nothing wrong with Buffalo,” Kessel says.

“Except fifty thousand out-of-work Polacks,” Turkel says.

“I guess you got no out-of-work people in Chicago,” Kessel says. “You just joined for the exercise.”

“Except he’s not getting any exercise, if he can help it!” Cole says.

The foreman comes by and tells them to get back to work. Kessel climbs another tree, stung by Turkel’s charge. What kind of man complains if someone else works hard? It only shows how even decent guys have to put up with assholes dragging them down. But it’s nothing new. He’s seen it before, back in Buffalo.

Buffalo, New York, is the symbolic home of this story. In the years preceding the First World War it grew into one of the great industrial metropolises of the United States. Located where Lake Erie flows into the Niagara river, strategically close to cheap electricity from Niagara Falls and cheap transportation by lakeboat from the midwest, it was a center of steel, automobiles, chemicals, grain milling, and brewing. Its major employers — Bethlehem Steel, Ford, Pierce Arrow, Gold Medal Flour, the National Biscuit Company, Ralston Purina, Quaker Oats, National Aniline — drew thousands of immigrants like Kessel’s family. Along Delaware Avenue stood the imperious and stylized mansions of the city’s old money, ersatz-Renaissance homes designed by Stanford White, huge Protestant churches, and a Byzantine synagogue. The city boasted the first modern skyscraper, designed by Louis Sullivan in the 1890s. From its productive factories to its polyglot work force to its class system and its boosterism, Buffalo was a monument to modern

industrial capitalism. It is the place Kessel has come from — almost an expression of his personality itself — and the place he, at times, fears he can never escape. A cold, grimy city dominated by church and family, blinkered and cramped, forever playing second fiddle to Chicago, New York, and Boston. It offers the immigrant the opportunity to find steady work in some factory or mill, but, though Kessel could not have put it into these words, it also puts a lid on his opportunities. It stands for all disappointed expectations, human limitations, tawdry compromises, for the inevitable choice of the expedient over the beautiful, for an American economic system that turns all things into commodities and measures men by their bank accounts. It is the home of the industrial proletariat.

It's not unique. It could be Youngstown, Akron, Detroit. It's the place my father, and I, grew up.

The afternoon turns hot and still; during a work break, Kessel strips to the waist. About two o'clock, a big black de Soto comes up the road and pulls off onto the shoulder. A couple of men in suits get out of the back, and one of them talks to the Forest Service foreman, who nods deferentially. The foreman calls over to the men.

"Boys, this here's Mr. Pike from the Interior Department. He's got a guest here to see how we work, a writer, Mr. H. G. Wells from England."

Most of the men couldn't care less, but the name strikes a spark in Kessel. He looks over at the little, pot-bellied man in the dark suit. The man is sweating; he brushes his mustache.

The foreman sends Kessel up to show them how they're topping the trees. He points out to the visitors where the others with rakes and shovels are leveling the ground for the overlook. Several other men are building a log rail fence from the treetops. From way above, Kessel can hear their voices between the thunks of his axe. H. G. Wells. He remembers reading *The War of the Worlds* in *Amazing Stories.* He's read *The Outline of History,* too. The stories, the history, are so large, it seems impossible that the man who wrote them could be standing not thirty feet below him. He tries to concentrate on the axe, the tree.

Time for this one to go. He calls down. The men below look up. Wells takes off his hat and shields his eyes with his hand. He's balding, and looks even smaller from up here. Strange that such big ideas could come from such a small man. It's kind of disappointing.

Wells leans over to Pike and says something. The treetop falls away. The pine sways like a bucking bronco, and Kessel holds on for dear life.

He comes down with the intention of saying something to Wells, telling him how much he admires him, but when he gets down the sight of the two men in suits and his awareness of his own sweaty chest make him timid. He heads down to the next tree. After another ten minutes the men get back in the car, drive away. Kessel curses himself for the opportunity lost.

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That evening at the New Willard hotel, Wells dines with his old friends Clarence Darrow and Charles Russell. Darrow and Russell are in Washington to testify before a congressional committee on a report they have just submitted to the administration concerning the monopolistic effects of the National Recovery Act. The right wing is trying to eviscerate Roosevelt's program for large scale industrial management, and the Darrow Report is playing right into their hands. Wells tries, with little success, to convince Darrow of the short-sightedness of his position.

"Roosevelt is willing to sacrifice the small man to the huge corporations," Darrow insists, his eyes bright.

"The small man? Your small man is a romantic fantasy," Wells says. "It's not the New Deal that's doing him in — it's the process of industrial progress. It's the twentieth century. You can't legislate yourself back into 1870."

"What about the individual?" Russell asks.

Wells snorts. "Walk out into the street. The individual is out on the street corner selling apples. The only thing that's going to save him is some coordinated effort, by intelligent, selfless men. Not your free market."

Darrow puffs on his cigar, exhales, smiles. "Don't get exasperated, H. G. We're not working for Standard Oil. But if I have to choose between the bureaucrat and the man pumping gas at the filling station, I'll take the pump jockey."

Wells sees he's got no chance against the American mythology of the common man. "Your pump jockey works for Standard Oil. And the last I checked, the free market hasn't expended much energy looking out for his interests."

“Have some more wine,” Russell says.

Russell refills their glasses with the excellent Bordeaux. It’s been a first rate meal. Wells finds the debate stimulating even when he can’t prevail; at one time that would have been enough, but as the years go on the need to prevail grows stronger in him. The times are out of joint, and when he looks around he sees desperation growing. A new world order is necessary — it’s so clear that even a fool ought to see it — but if he can’t even convince radicals like Darrow, what hope is there of gaining the acquiescence of the shareholders in the utility trusts?

The answer is that the changes will have to be made over their objections. As Roosevelt seems prepared to do. Wells’s dinner with the President has heartened him in a way that this debate cannot negate.

Wells brings up an item he read in the *Washington Post.* A lecturer for the communist party — a young Negro — was barred from speaking at the University of Virginia. Wells’s question is, was the man barred because he was a communist or because he was Negro?

“Either condition,” Darrow says sardonically, “is fatal in Virginia.”

“But students point out the University has allowed communists to speak on campus before, and has allowed Negroes to perform music there.”

“They can perform, but they can’t speak,” Russell says. “This isn’t unusual. Go down to the Paradise Ballroom, not a mile from here. There’s a Negro orchestra playing there, but no Negroes are allowed inside to listen.”

“You should go to hear them anyway,” Darrow says. “It’s Duke Ellington. Have you heard of him?”

“I don’t get on with the titled nobility,” Wells quips.

“Oh, this Ellington’s a noble fellow, all right, but I don’t think you’ll find him in the peerage,” Russell says.

“He plays jazz, doesn’t he?”

“Not like any jazz you’ve heard,” Darrow says. “It’s something totally new. You should find a place for it in one of your utopias.”

All three of them are for helping the colored peoples. Darrow has defended Negroes accused of capital crimes. Wells, on his first visit to America almost thirty years ago, met with Booker T. Washington and came away impressed, although he still considers the peaceable

co-existence of the white and colored races problematical.

"What are you working on now, Wells?" Russell asks. "What new improbability are you preparing to assault us with? Racial equality? Sexual liberation?"

"I'm writing a screen treatment based on *The Shape of Things to Come,"* Wells says. He tells them about his screenplay, sketching out for them the future he has in his mind. An apocalyptic war, a war of unsurpassed brutality that will begin, in his film, in 1939. In this war, the creations of science will be put to the services of destruction in ways that will make the horrors of the Great War pale in comparison. Whole populations will be exterminated. But then, out of the ruins will arise the new world. The orgy of violence will purge the human race of the last vestiges of tribal thinking. Then will come the organization of the directionless and weak by the intelligent and purposeful. The new man. Cleaner, stronger, more rational. Wells can see it. He talks on, supplely, surely, late into the night. His mind is fertile with invention, still. He can see that Darrow and Russell, despite their Yankee individualism, are caught up by his vision. The future may be threatened, but it is not entirely closed.

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Friday night, back in the barracks at Fort Hunt, Kessel lies on his bunk reading a second-hand *Wonder Stories.* He's halfway through the tale of a scientist who invents an evolution chamber that progresses him through 50,000 years of evolution in an hour, turning him into a big-brained telepathic monster. The evolved scientist is totally without emotions and wants to control the world. But his body's atrophied. Will the hero, a young engineer, be able to stop him?

At a plank table in the aisle, a bunch of men are playing poker for cigarettes. They're talking about women and dogs. Cole throws in his hand and comes over to sit on the next bunk. "Still reading that stuff, Jack?"

"Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Are you coming into D.C. with us tomorrow? Sgt. Sauter says we can catch a ride in on one of the trucks."

Kessel thinks about it. Cole probably wants to borrow some money. Two days after he gets his monthly pay he's broke. He's

always looking for a good time. Kessel spends his leave more quietly; he usually walks into Alexandria — about six miles — and sees a movie or just walks around town. Still, he would like to see more of Washington. “Okay.”

Cole looks at the sketchbook poking out from beneath Kessel’s pillow. “Any more hot pictures?”

Immediately Kessel regrets trusting Cole. Yet there’s not much he can say — the book is full of pictures of movie stars he’s drawn. “I’m learning to draw. And at least I don’t waste my time like the rest of you guys.”

Cole looks serious. “You know, you’re not any better than the rest of us,” he says, not angrily. “You’re just another Polack. Don’t get so high-and-mighty.”

“Just because I want to improve myself doesn’t mean I’m high-and-mighty.”

“Hey, Cole, are you in or out?” Turkel yells from the table.

“Dream on, Jack,” Cole says, and returns to the game.

Kessel tries to go back to the story, but he isn’t interested anymore. He can figure out that the hero is going to defeat the hyper-evolved scientist in the end. He folds his arms behind his head and stares at the knots in the rafters.

It’s true, Kessel does spend a lot of time dreaming. But he has things he wants to do, and he’s not going to waste his life drinking and whoring like the rest of them.

Kessel’s always been different. Quieter, smarter. He was always going to do something better than the rest of them; he’s well spoken, he likes to read. Even though he didn’t finish high school, he reads everything: *Amazing, Astounding, Wonder Stories.* He believes in the future. He doesn’t want to end up trapped in some factory his whole life.

Kessel’s parents immigrated from Poland in 1911. Their name was Kisiel, but his got Germanized in Catholic school. For ten years the family moved from one to another middle-sized industrial town, as Joe Kisiel bounced from job to job. Springfield. Utica. Syracuse. Rochester. Kessel remembers them loading up a wagon in the middle of the night with all their belongings in order to jump the rent on the run-down house in Syracuse. He remembers pulling a cart down to the Utica Club brewery, a nickel in his hand, to buy his father a keg of beer. He remembers them finally settling in the First Ward of Buffalo. The First Ward, at the foot of the Erie Canal,

was an Irish neighborhood as far back as anybody could remember, and the Kisiels were the only Poles there. That's where he developed his chameleon ability to fit in, despite the fact he wanted nothing more than to get out. But he had to protect his mother, sister, and little brothers from their father's drunken rages. When Joe Kisiel died in 1924, it was a relief, despite the fact that his son ended up supporting the family.

For ten years Kessel has strained against the tug of that responsibility. He's sought the free and easy feeling of the road, of places different from where he grew up, romantic places where the sun shines and he can make something entirely American of himself.

Despite his ambitions, he's never accomplished much. He's been essentially a drifter, moving from job to job. Starting as a pinsetter in a bowling alley, he moved on to a flour mill. He would have stayed in the mill, only he developed an allergy to the flour dust, so he became an electrician. He would have stayed an electrician, except he had a fight with a boss and got blacklisted. He left Buffalo because of his father; he kept coming back because of his mother. When the Depression hit, he tried to get a job in Detroit at the auto factories, but that was plain stupid in the face of the universal collapse, and he ended up working up in the peninsula as a farm hand, then as a logger. It was seasonal work, and when the season was over he was out of a job. In the winter of 1933, rather than freeze his ass off in northern Michigan, he joined the CCC. Now he sends twenty-five of his thirty dollars a month back to his mother and sister back in Buffalo. And imagines the future.

When he thinks about it, there are two futures. The first one is the one from the magazines and books. Bright, slick, easy. We, looking back on it, can see it to be the fifteen-cent utopianism of Hugo Gernsback's *Popular Electrics* that flourished in the midst of the Depression. A degradation of the marvelous inventions that made Wells his early reputation, minus the social theorizing that drove Wells's technological speculations. The common man's boosterism. There's money to be made telling people like Jack Kessel about the wonderful world of the future.

The second future is Kessel's own. That one's a lot harder to see. It contains work. A good job, doing something he likes, using his skills. Not working for another man, but making something that would be useful for others. Building something for the future. And a

woman, a gentle woman, for his wife. Not some cheap dancehall queen.

So when Kessel saw H. G. Wells in person, that meant something to him. He's had his doubts. He's twenty-nine years old, not a kid anymore. If he's ever going to get anywhere, it's going to have to start happening soon. He has the feeling that something significant is going to happen to him. Wells is a man who sees the future. He moves in that bright world where things make sense. He represents something that Kessel wants.

But the last thing Kessel wants is to end up back in Buffalo.

He pulls the sketchbook, the sketchbook he was to show me twenty years later, from under his pillow. He turns past drawings of movie stars: Jean Harlow, Mae West, Carole Lombard — the beautiful, unreachable faces of his longing — and of natural scenes: rivers, forests, birds — to a blank page. The page is as empty as the future, waiting for him to write upon it. He lets his imagination soar. He envisions an eagle, gliding high above the mountains of the west that he has never seen, but that he knows he will visit someday. The eagle is America; it is his own dreams. He begins to draw.

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Kessel did not know that Wells's life has not worked out as well as he planned. At that moment, Wells is pining after the Russian émigré Moura Budberg, once Maxim Gorky's secretary, with whom Wells has been carrying on an off-and-on affair since 1920. His wife of thirty years, Amy Catherine "Jane" Wells, died in 1927. Since that time, Wells has been adrift, alternating spells of furious pamphleteering with listless periods of suicidal depression. Meanwhile, all London is gossiping about the recent attack published in *Time and Tide* by his vengeful ex-lover Odette Keun. Have his mistakes followed him across the Atlantic to undermine his purpose? Does Darrow think him a jumped-up Cockney? A moment of doubt overwhelms him. In the end, the future depends as much on the open mindedness of men like Darrow as it does on a reorganization of society. What good is a guild of samurai if no one arises to take the job?

Wells doesn't like the trend of these thoughts. If human nature lets him down, then his whole life has been a waste.

But he's seen the president. He's seen those workers on the road. Those men climbing the trees risk their lives without complaining, for minimal pay. It's easy to think of them as stupid or desperate or simply young, but it's also possible to give them credit for dedication to their work. They don't seem to be ridden by the desire to grub and clutch that capitalism demands; if you look at it properly that may be the explanation for their ending up wards of the state. And is Wells any better? If he hadn't got an education, he would have ended up a miserable draper's assistant.

Wells is due to leave for New York Sunday. Saturday night finds him sitting in his room, trying to write, after a solitary dinner in the New Willard. Another bottle of wine, or his age, has stirred something in Wells, and despite his rationalizations, he finds himself near despair. Moura has rejected him. He needs the soft, supportive embrace of a lover, but instead he has this stuffy hotel room in a heat wave.

He remembers writing *The Time Machine,* he and Jane living in rented rooms in Sevenoaks with her ailing mother, worried about money, about whether the landlady would put them out. In the drawer of the dresser was a writ from the court that refused to grant him a divorce from his wife Isabel. He remembers a warm night, late in August — much like this one — sitting up late after Jane and her mother went to bed, writing at the round table before the open window, under the light of a paraffin lamp. One part of his mind was caught up in the rush of creation, burning, following the Time Traveller back to the sphinx, pursued by the Morlocks, only to discover that his machine is gone and he is trapped without escape from his desperate circumstance. At the same moment he could hear the landlady, out in the garden, fully aware that he could hear her, complaining to the neighbor about his and Jane's scandalous habits. On the one side, the petty conventions of a crabbed world; on the other, in his mind — the future, their peril and hope. Moths fluttering through the window beat themselves against the lampshade and fell onto the manuscript; he brushed them away unconsciously and continued, furiously, in a white heat. The Time Traveller, battered and hungry, returning from the future with a warning, and a flower.

He opens the hotel windows all the way, but the curtains aren't stirred by a breath of air. Below, in the street, he hears the sound of traffic, and music. He decides to send a telegram to Moura, but after

several false starts, he finds he has nothing to say. Why has she refused to marry him? Maybe he is finally too old, and the magnetism of sex or power or intellect that has drawn women to him for forty years has finally all been squandered. The prospect of spending the last years remaining to him alone fills him with dread.

He turns on the radio, gets successive band shows: Morton Downey, Fats Waller. Jazz. Paging through the newspaper, he comes across an advertisement for the Ellington orchestra Darrow mentioned: It's at the ballroom just down the block. But the thought of a smoky room doesn't appeal to him. He considers the cinema. He has never been much for the "movies." Though he thinks them an unrivaled opportunity to educate, that promise has never been properly seized — something he hopes to do in *Things to Come.* The newspaper reveals an uninspiring selection: *Twenty Million Sweethearts,* a musical at the Earle, *The Black Cat,* with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi at the Rialto, and *Tarzan and His Mate* at the Palace. To these Americans, he is the equivalent of this hack, Edgar Rice Burroughs. The books I read as a child, that fired my father's imagination and my own, Wells considers his frivolous apprentice work. His serious work is discounted. His ideas mean nothing.

Wells decides to try the Tarzan movie. He dresses for the sultry weather — Washington in spring is like high summer in London — and goes down to the lobby. He checks his street guide and takes the streetcar to the Palace Theater, where he buys an orchestra seat, for twenty-five cents, to see *Tarzan and His Mate.*

It is a perfectly wretched movie, comprised wholly of romantic fantasy, melodrama, and sexual innuendo. The dramatic leads perform with wooden idiocy surpassed only by the idiocy of the screenplay. Wells is attracted by the undeniable charms of the young heroine, Maureen O'Sullivan, but the film is devoid of intellectual content. Thinking of the audience at which such a farrago must be aimed depresses him. This is art as fodder. Yet the theater is filled, and the people are held in rapt attention. This only depresses Wells more. If these citizens are the future of America, then the future of America is dim.

An hour into the film, the antics of an anthropomorphized chimpanzee, a scene of transcendent stupidity which nevertheless sends the audience into gales of laughter, drives Wells from the theater. It is still mid-evening. He wanders down the avenue of theaters, restaurants, and clubs. On the sidewalk are beggars,

ignored by the passersby. In an alley behind a hotel, Wells spots a woman and child picking through the ashcans beside the restaurant kitchen.

Unexpectedly, he comes upon the marquee announcing “Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.” From within the open doors of the ballroom wafts the sound of jazz. Impulsively, Wells buys a ticket and goes in.

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Kessel and his cronies have spent the day walking around the mall, which the WPA is re-landscaping. They’ve seen the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian, the White House. Kessel has his picture taken in front of a statue of a soldier — a photo I have sitting on my desk. I’ve studied it many times. He looks forthrightly into the camera, faintly smiling. His face is confident, unlined.

When night comes, they hit the bars. Prohibition was lifted only last year and the novelty has not yet worn off. The younger men get plastered, but Kessel finds himself uninterested in getting drunk. A couple of them set their minds on women and head for the Gayety Burlesque; Cole, Kessel, and Turkel end up in the Paradise Ballroom listening to Duke Ellington.

They have a couple of drinks, ask some girls to dance. Kessel dances with a short girl with a southern accent who refuses to look him in the eyes. After thanking her he returns to the others at the bar. He sips his beer. “Not so lucky, Jack?” Cole says.

“She doesn’t like a tall man,” Turkel says.

Kessel wonders why Turkel came along. Turkel is always complaining about “niggers,” and his only comment on the Ellington band so far has been to complain about how a bunch of jigs can make a living playing jungle music while white men sleep in barracks and eat grits three times a day. Kessel’s got nothing against the colored, and he likes the music, though it’s not exactly the kind of jazz he’s used to. It doesn’t sound much like Dixieland. It’s darker, bigger, more dangerous. Ellington, resplendent in tie and tails, looks like he’s enjoying himself up there at his piano, knocking out minimal solos while the orchestra plays cool and low.

Turning from them to look across the tables, Kessel sees a little man sitting alone beside the dance floor, watching the young

couples sway in the music. To his astonishment, he recognizes Wells. He's been given another chance. Hesitating only a moment, Kessel abandons his friends, goes over to the table, and introduces himself.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wells. You might not remember me, but I was one of the men you saw yesterday in Virginia working along the road. The CCC?"

Wells looks up at a gangling young man wearing a khaki uniform, his olive tie neatly knotted and tucked between the second and third buttons of his shirt. His hair is slicked down, parted in the middle. Wells doesn't remember anything of him. "Yes?"

"I — I been reading your stories and books a lot of years. I admire your work."

Something in the man's earnestness affects Wells. "Please sit down," he says.

Kessel takes a seat. "Thank you." He pronounces "th" as "t" so that "thank" comes out "tank." He sits tentatively, as if the chair is mortgaged, and seems at a loss for words.

"What's your name?"

"John Kessel. My friends call me Jack."

The orchestra finishes a song and the dancers stop in their places, applauding. Up on the bandstand, Ellington leans into the microphone. "Mood Indigo," he says, and instantly they swing into it: The clarinet moans in low register, in unison with the muted trumpet and trombone, paced by the steady rhythm guitar, the brushed drums. The song's melancholy suits Wells's mood.

"Are you from Virginia?"

"My family lives in Buffalo. That's in New York."

"Ah — yes. Many years ago, I visited Niagara Falls, and took the train through Buffalo." Wells remembers riding along a lakefront of factories spewing waste water into the lake, past heaps of coal, clouds of orange and black smoke from blast furnaces. In front of dingy rowhouses, ragged hedges struggled through the smoky air. The landscape of laissez faire. "I imagine the Depression has hit Buffalo severely."

"Yes sir."

"What work did you do there?"

Kessel feels nervous, but he opens up a little. "A lot of things. I used to be an electrician until I got blacklisted."

"Blacklisted?"

“I was working on this job where the super told me to set the wiring wrong. I argued with him, but he just told me to do it his way. So I waited until he went away, then I sneaked into the construction shack and checked the blueprints. He didn’t think I could read blueprints, but I could. I found out I was right and he was wrong. So I went back and did it right. The next day when he found out, he fired me. Then the so-and-so went and got me blacklisted.”

Though he doesn’t know how much credence to put in this story, Wells’s sympathies are aroused. It’s the kind of thing that must happen all the time. He recognizes in Kessel the immigrant stock that, when Wells visited the U.S. in 1906, made him skeptical about the future of America. He’d theorized that these Italians and Slavs, coming from lands with no democratic tradition, unable to speak English, would degrade the already corrupt political process. They could not be made into good citizens; they would not work well when they could work poorly, and, given the way the economic deal was stacked against them, would seldom rise high enough to do better.

But Kessel is clean, well-spoken despite his accent, and deferential. Wells realizes that this is one of the men who was topping trees along the river road.

Meanwhile, Kessel detects a sadness in Wells’s manner. He had not imagined that Wells might be sad, and he feels sympathy for him. It occurs to him, to his own surprise, that he might be able to make *Wells* feel better. “So — what do you think of our country?” he asks.

“Good things seem to be happening here. I’m impressed with your President Roosevelt.”

“Roosevelt’s the best friend the working man ever had.” Kessel pronounces the name “Roozvelt.” “He’s a man that — ” he struggles for the words, “ — that’s not for the past. He’s for the future.”

It begins to dawn on Wells that Kessel is not an example of a class, or a sociological study, but a man like himself with an intellect, opinions, dreams. He thinks of his own youth, struggling to rise in a classbound society. He leans forward across the table. “You believe in the future? You think things can be different?”

“I think they have to be, Mr. Wells.”

Wells sits back. “Good. So do I.”

Kessel is stunned by this intimacy. It is more than he had hoped

for, yet it leaves him with little to say. He wants to tell Wells about his dreams, and at the same time ask him a thousand questions. He wants to tell Wells everything he has seen in the world, and to hear Wells tell him the same. He casts about for something to say.

"I always liked your writing. I like to read scientifiction."

"Scientifiction?"

Kessel shifts his long legs. "You know — stories about the future. Monsters from outer space. The Martians. The Time Machine. You're the best scientifiction writer I ever read, next to Edgar Rice Burroughs." Kessel pronounces "Edgar," "Eedgar."

"Edgar Rice Burroughs?"

"Yes."

"You *like* Burroughs?"

Kessel hears the disapproval in Wells's voice. "Well — maybe not as much as, as *The Time Machine,"* he stutters. "Burroughs never wrote about monsters as good as your Morlocks."

Wells is nonplussed. "Monsters."

"Yes." Kessel feels something's going wrong, but he sees no way out. "But he does put more romance in his stories. That princess — Dejah Thoris?"

All Wells can think of is Tarzan in his loincloth on the movie screen, and the moronic audience. After a lifetime of struggling, a hundred books written to change the world, in the service of men like this, is this all his work has come to? To be compared to the writer of pulp trash? To "Eedgar Rice Burroughs?" He laughs aloud.

At Wells's laugh, Kessel stops. He knows he's done something wrong, but he doesn't know what.

Wells's weariness has dropped down onto his shoulders again like an iron cloak. "Young man — go away," he says. "You don't know what you're saying. Go back to Buffalo."

Kessel's face burns. He stumbles from the table. The room is full of noise and laughter. He's run up against that wall again. He's just an ignorant Polack after all; it's his stupid accent, his clothes. He should have talked about something else — *The Outline of History,* politics. But what made him think he could talk like an equal with a man like Wells in the first place? Wells lives in a different world. The future is for men like him. Kessel feels himself the prey of fantasies. It's a bitter joke.

He clutches the bar, orders another beer. His reflection in the mirror behind the ranked bottles is small and ugly.

“Whatsa matter, Jack?” Turkel asks him. “Didn’t he want to dance neither?”

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And that’s the story, essentially, that never happened.

Not long after this, Kessel did go back to Buffalo. During the Second World War, he worked as a crane operator in the forty-inch rolling mill of Bethlehem Steel. He met his wife, Angela Giorlandino, during the war, and they married in June 1945. After the war, he quit the plant and became a carpenter. Their first child, a girl, died in infancy. Their second, a boy, was born in 1950. At that time, Kessel began building the house that, like so many things in his life, he was never to entirely complete. He worked hard, had two more children. There were good years and bad ones. He held a lot of jobs. The recession of 1958 just about flattened him; our family had to go on welfare. Things got better, but they never got good. After the 1950s, the economy of Buffalo, like that of all U.S. industrial cities caught in the transition to a post-industrial age, declined steadily. Kessel never did work for himself, and as an old man was no more prosperous than he had been as a young one.

In the years preceding his death in 1946, Wells was to go on to further disillusionment. His efforts to create a sane world met with increasing frustration. He became bitter, enraged. Moura Budberg never agreed to marry him, and he lived alone. The war came, and it was, in some ways, even worse than he had predicted. He continued to propagandize for the socialist world state throughout, but with increasing irrelevance. The new leftists like Orwell considered him a dinosaur, fatally out of touch with the realities of world politics, a simpleminded technocrat with no understanding of the darkness of the human heart. Wells’s last book, *Mind at the End of its Tether,* proposed that the human race faced an evolutionary crisis that would lead to its extinction unless humanity leapt to a higher state of consciousness; a leap about which Wells speculated with little hope or conviction.

Sitting there in the Washington ballroom in 1934, Wells might well have understood that for all his thinking and preaching about the future, the future had irrevocably passed him by.

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But the story isn't quite over yet. Back in the Washington ballroom, Wells sits humiliated, a little guilty for sending Kessel away so harshly. Kessel, his back to the dance floor, stares humiliated into his glass of beer. Gradually, both of them are pulled back from dark thoughts of their own inadequacies by the sound of Ellington's orchestra.

Ellington stands in front of the big grand piano, behind him the band: three saxes, two clarinets, two trumpets, trombones, a drummer, guitarist, bass. "Creole Love Call," Ellington whispers into the microphone, then sits again at the piano. He waves his hand once, twice, and the clarinets slide into a low, wavering theme. The trumpet, muted, echoes it. The bass player and guitarist strum ahead at a deliberate pace, rhythmic, erotic, bluesy. Kessel and Wells, separate across the room, each unaware of the other, are alike drawn in. The trumpet growls eight bars of raucous solo. The clarinet follows, wailing. The music is full of pain and longing — but pain controlled, ordered, mastered. Longing unfulfilled, but not overpowering.

As I write this, it plays on my stereo. If anyone has a right to bitterness at thwarted dreams, a black man in 1934 had that right. That such men could, in such conditions, make this music opens a world of possibilities.

Through the music speaks a truth about art that Wells does not understand, but that I hope to: that art doesn't have to deliver a message in order to say something important. That art isn't always a means to an end but sometimes an end in itself. That art may not be able to change the world, but it can still change the moment.

Through the music speaks a truth about life that Kessel, sixteen years before my birth, doesn't understand, but that I hope to: that life constrained is not life wasted. That despite unfulfilled dreams, peace is possible.

Listening, Wells feels that peace steal over his soul. Kessel feels it, too.

And so they wait, poised, calm, before they move on into their respective futures, into our own present. Into the world of limitation and loss. Into Buffalo.

— for my father

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Kessel is the author of the novels *Good News from Outer Space* and *Corrupting Dr. Nice,* and, in collaboration with James Patrick Kelly, *Freedom Beach.* His short story collections are *Meeting in Infinity, The Pure Product, The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories,* and *The Collected Kessel.* His fiction has twice received the Nebula Award, in addition to the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and the James Tiptree Jr. Award for fiction dealing with gender issues. With Kelly, he has edited six anthologies of stories re-visioning contemporary short speculative fiction, most recently *Digital Rapture: The Singularity Anthology* (2012) and *Kafkaesque* (2011). Kessel's play "Faustfeathers" won the Paul Green Playwright's Prize, and his story "A Clean Escape" was adapted as an episode of the ABC TV series *Masters of Science Fiction.* He has taught American literature and fiction writing at North Carolina State University since 1982.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

Red Planet

Caroline M. Yoachim

Tara sat in the back of her marine biology class and read the news on her braille tablet. One hundred eighty-seven countries had recognized Mars as the first off-planet country, much to the consternation of the as-yet-unrecognized lunar colonies. The Martian flag was blue with a red circle. Like Mars itself, the flag was inaccessible to Tara. What was blue? Tara could make a list — the ocean and the sky, Kiki's hair that time she dyed it. Blue was cold, and red was hot, but Kiki's hair didn't feel any cooler after she dyed it. Color made no sense.

Kiki was leaving for Mars on the next transport, three weeks away, to start her graduate work on the microorganisms buried deep beneath the planet's surface. Tara sighed. She'd been accepted to the Xenobiology program, too, but Mars was governed by a bunch of ableist jerks who didn't want to make accommodations for her disability. According to them, the medical requirements were for her safety and comfort, but it was really the same bullshit she'd dealt with all her life. No one wanted to believe that a blind girl could be a scientist, especially a biologist, but it was the only thing she'd ever wanted to do.

She remembered the first science book she'd ever read on her own — *Touch the Universe* by Noreen Grice. The tactile pictures of the solar system and beyond had captured her imagination and made her realize that a career in science wasn't an impossible goal. Her interests later shifted from astronomy to biology, but there was still a soft spot in her heart for astronomy, for distant planets and the vast emptiness of space. The Xenobiology program on Mars would be perfect for her, if only she could get herself to the planet.

After class, she heard someone approach as she packed up her things.

"Tara." It was Dr. Archer. Had he noticed that she wasn't paying attention in class?

"I'm sorry about the tablet," Tara said, "I already know the

material and I wanted to read the live newsfeed on Mars — ”

“After working in my lab so long, you could have given the lecture today,” Dr. Archer reassured her. “I’m glad you’re here, though. A colleague of mine is running an experimental vision treatment, and I think you’d be a great candidate.”

Tara almost declined, but, out of respect for her advisor, she resisted the urge. If the treatment let her pass the vision test, she could do her graduate work on Mars, with Kiki. Dr. Archer clearly thought it was a fantastic opportunity. He had always been supportive of her in the lab, and his intentions were good, but he never quite managed to suppress his surprise when she did something well.

Dr. Archer explained the treatment, over-enunciating the words slightly, as though being blind somehow impaired her hearing. Modified cells from electric eels would power retinal implants, metabolizing sugar from her own bloodstream. Unlike traditional batteries, the eel cells did not carry the risk of releasing toxins into her body if they failed, so everything was internal. No telltale glasses to hold the power source and give her an automatic fail on the vision test. It was a great new technology, except that Tara had never had any desire to see.

Was the graduate program on Mars worth risking the treatment?

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Tara discussed the details of the study with the research team, and talked it over with her parents, with Kiki, with Dr. Archer. She confirmed with Dr. Chalasani, head of the Xenobiology department on Mars, that she could defer acceptance of her graduate student position until she had recovered from the surgery. She read the latest research on electric eels.

Tara was happy with herself the way she was. She resented the implication that the surgery would somehow improve her, or worse, fix her. There were plenty of research labs on Earth that would be happy to have her.

Weeks passed, and Kiki left for Mars. Tara buried herself in research to avoid making a final decision about the retinal implants. She continued collecting data for a study that examined changes in the shape of phytoplankton in response to changes in climate and ocean current. Phytoplankton were tiny organisms, too small for her

sighted colleagues to see with their naked eyes. Who better than a blind woman to study the invisible?

Tara loaded a slide into the microscope and sent the digitized output to her tablet. The image was rendered in raised lines that she could trace with her fingertips. She did a count of each morphological type and logged the results, as she had done for hundreds of samples across varying conditions. Additional samples only strengthened the patterns they'd seen in the preliminary data. Climate change affected not only the quantity of phytoplankton, but also the proportions of various shapes. Different conditions favored different morphologies, and the phytoplankton were adapting.

The techniques she used to study phytoplankton were well suited to studying the microfossils buried beneath the surface of Mars. Instead of tiny ocean plankton, she could trace the shapes of alien microbes. Her fieldwork could take her beyond the oceans of Earth and onto the surface of Mars. If she wanted to be at the forefront of Xenobiology research, she too would have to adapt.

She signed the consent forms and scheduled her surgery.

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The retinal implants were both a success and a failure. When the doctors peeled away the bandages, Tara got visual input she had never experienced before, but her mind had no way to make sense of it. She knew the difference between smooth and bumpy, and how a cube was different from a sphere — but she knew these things by touch, not by sight. It was frustrating to be unable to parse a visual world that even small children understood.

Mars wasn't worth it.

Tara went to a psychiatrist and got a diagnosis for depression, and a prescription for TMS: Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Therapy. The psychiatrist didn't know about her implants. She didn't know the damage an electromagnetic coil could do to the eel cells that powered Tara's unwanted sight. Tara picked up the TMS wand from the pharmacy. It was shaped like the brush she used to scrub her toilet, and it would scrub her sight away.

Tara pressed the TMS wand against her temple, but she couldn't force herself to activate the electromagnetic coil.

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Mars was too far away for real-time conversations, so instead she cried to Kiki in a video message, and had to wait half an hour for her consolations. When a response finally came, Tara closed her eyes and let the familiar sound of Kiki's voice ease her fears. "You don't have to make sense of *everything,"* Kiki said, "All you have to do is pass the vision test. Focus on what you need for that, and let the rest go. Oh, and I dyed my hair again, it's purple."

Tara smiled. Kiki knew that she'd listen with her eyes closed, and she knew that color was the aspect of vision that Tara found most intriguing, and most baffling. Tara played the message again, eyes open this time, and tried to notice a difference in Kiki's hair. She failed in that, but succeeded in identifying the high contrast edges where face met hairline, and noticed the motion at the end of the video, when Kiki turned her head to show off her freshly dyed hair.

Tara kept her eyes open for an hour that day. Then two hours the next day, then four, and eventually most of the day. She learned to see edges and recognize objects. She learned to track things that were moving. She forced herself to use the sense she'd never wanted.

Tara tried to lose herself in her research, but even there she was plagued by her newly acquired sight. When she reached for a flask, she misjudged the distance, and her hand knocked it to the floor. The glass shattered.

She picked up the biggest piece of the broken flask, and it sliced her hand. She cursed at her foolishness for trying to grab something sharp, then cursed again at her inability to perform what should have been a simple task. Vision had ruined not only her perception but also her coordination. She stared at her hand, a trickle of blood oozing out from her finger.

The blood, she told herself, was red. She put a bandage on the cut, and carefully cleaned the mess she'd made. When all the glass was gone, she mopped up the seawater and made a record of the lost phytoplankton in her research notes, painstakingly written by hand to force herself to practice reading and writing. Like her blood, the ink she used to log the lost sample was red.

Red like the sea stars Kiki used to study, still clinging to the sides of their tank in Dr. Archer's lab. Red like the shuttle trails across the sky at sunset. Red like the planet that haunted her dreams — a tiny circle of red in a field of black, like a single drop of blood on a skin of darkness.

Red was everything she wanted but could not have.

Two years after her surgery, Tara took the vision test. She passed, and laughed when she saw that the official stamp of approval on her medical certificate was red.

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The Nation of Mars could require that she have sight before she immigrated, but they couldn't force her to use it. On the shuttle, she walked from her quarters to the mess hall with her eyes closed, refusing the repeated offers of assistance from other passengers.

Tara texted messages back and forth with Kiki on her braille tablet. She could read printed letters, but she preferred the feel of braille beneath her fingertips. Kiki told her all about the latest excavation site and a new class of microorganisms she'd discovered there. Tara complained about the stringent weight restrictions on luggage for the shuttle ride. She didn't mention that she had left behind two pairs of shoes to make room for a TMS wand.

At night she dreamed of collecting soil samples, the feel of cool dirt through protective gloves, the soft hum of spacesuit life support systems, and the warmth of Kiki's face beneath her fingertips. During her long days on the ship, she worried. Not about the research or adapting to life on Mars. She worried that people would expect her to use her ability to see. How would Kiki feel when Tara wanted to touch her face instead of looking at it? How would Dr. Chalasani react if Tara did her fieldwork with her eyes closed?

She walked in carefully measured steps to the largest viewport in the shuttle, the rectangular window at the front of the common room. She clutched her TMS wand in her hand, the weight of the electromagnetic coils both reassuring and unsettling. Kiki would understand, she always understood. And Dr. Chalasani would never need to know why or how the implants had failed. Tara opened her eyes and stared at the approaching red planet.

Then she closed her eyes, and surrounded herself in the comfort of black.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline M. Yoachim lives in Seattle and loves cold cloudy weather. She is the author of dozens of short stories, appearing in *Asimov's, Clarkesworld,* and *Daily Science Fiction,* among other places. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

Veil of Ignorance

David Barr Kirtley

Something strange is happening to me.

We're at Conrad's vacation house, a sprawling mansion that orbits the gas giant Hades-3. (His father owns both the house and the planet.) Conrad is in the living room watching sports. His girlfriend Alyssa is standing by the mirror in the bathroom, fixing her hair. Her friend Kat is sitting near the bay windows, watching the stars and the roiling vermeil clouds on the world below. Dillon is in the kitchen, mixing drinks. Brad is slouched on the sofa, watching everyone with a lazy smile.

And I don't know which of them I am.

Perception shifts. A few moments of Alyssa, running my fingers through silky hair. A moment of Dillon, using my knife to slice limes for the drinks. A moment of Kat, feeling awe of those looming bands of color, of those constantly churning swirls that look so majestic, and make me feel so insignificant. Then Conrad — pride at my team's success, at my father's wealth.

Then Brad. I feel quite smug. "It's starting to work," I tell them. "You can all feel it, can't you?"

Dillon comes in from the kitchen with the drinks. I hand one of them to Conrad, who thanks me, and one to Kat, who takes it silently. "Feel what?" I ask.

Brad gestures to the smoldering bowl at the center of the coffee table, at the Callipsarian pipe, and whatever that shit was we've all been smoking.

"Something very strange is happening to me," Kat says.

Brad ignores her. "You see, I had this idea. A few weeks ago, Dillon and I were talking politics, and he brings up this thing about Rawls."

Conrad sighs and orders the computer to take a break. I want to watch the end of the game, but this is starting to feel really weird.

Alyssa comes out of the bathroom, looking gorgeous, as always. I sit down on the couch next to Conrad. "What's going on, Brad?" I

ask. “What *was* that stuff you gave us?”

“Just sit and listen,” Brad says. “All will become clear.”

Conrad turns to Dillon. “Who’s Rawls?”

“John Rawls,” I explain, puzzled about where this is going. “Twentieth-century. He tried to revive the social contract theory, which states that the only fair laws are those that everyone can agree to.”

“Whatever.” Alyssa tosses her hair. “Someone get me another drink.”

Conrad holds up a hand to her. “Quiet,” I say. “I want to hear this.”

Dillon shrugs and keeps going. “The problem with the social contract is that people *don’t* agree. Slave-owners think that slavery is fair, slaves don’t. So Rawls envisions a hypothetical situation in which the two of them don’t know who is who. Put behind this *veil of ignorance,* neither would support slavery, knowing that he himself might be the slave.” I start to see where this is going, and finish, “Once self-interest is cancelled out, it turns out that they agree on principle.”

Kat interrupts. “Brad, will you cut the shit and tell us what’s going on?” I say. “Why can’t I tell who I am?” Then Dillon starts to answer my question, in that patronizing tone of his.

“Don’t you see?” he says. “We’ve been put behind a veil of ignorance ourselves.”

“Very good.” Brad nods at him. “A few weeks ago I was hanging out with this Callipsarian dealer on Far-Guardport — ”

Alyssa frowns. “Which ones are they?” I ask softly. “Callipsarians?”

“The purple ones,” Kat says. “From Auropelli. With the tentacles. Three yellow eyes.”

“Oh yeah,” I say.

Conrad elbows me. “Quiet.”

“ — and we were totally trashed. Talking politics, philosophy, metaphysics, et cetera, et cetera, and I start telling it about this veil of ignorance idea, and it says it’s got some stuff that can do that. So it sells me — ”

“Why?” Dillon asks. My word hangs there, alone in the silence for a few moments.

“Well, look,” Brad says. “This group, this band of *friends* — if that’s what you want to call us — is broken. We all know it, but no

one wants to say it. Well, I said it." He levels his finger at Conrad. "Conrad treats his girlfriend like shit. He also treats Dillon like shit. That is, unless Dillon starts picking on one of the girls, in which case Conrad gangs up with him. And of course," he finishes, "everyone treats me like shit all the time."

"Conrad does *not* treat me like shit," Alyssa says, offended.

"Quiet," he tells her.

"I thought this might clear the air," Brad says. "Behind our very own veil of ignorance, some of us may reach a new consensus on how we ought to be treating each other."

Alyssa says, "I don't like this. I don't like having someone else controlling my body, even for a moment." I feel violated.

"No one else is controlling your body." Brad sighs. "That's not how it works. The drug creates localized telepathy with scrambled ego. Alyssa's brain is still controlling Alyssa's body. Alyssa's thoughts — "

"To the extent that she *has* any," Dillon interjects.

" — are still her own. The only difference is, now everyone experiences everyone's thoughts, and no one knows which set of thoughts is his own."

Kat crosses her arms. "I don't want to share my thoughts."

Brad shrugs. "Too late," I say. "Don't do drugs."

Conrad gets to his feet. He looks pissed off. "I think Brad needs to have his ass kicked for pulling this little stunt."

"No," Dillon says, "think about it. Our identities are all mixed together. If Conrad hits Brad, we all feel it equally. What's the point of that?"

"Hmmm." Conrad thinks for a moment, then says, "So we just wait until the drug wears off, then hit him."

Kat glances at him. "What if *you're* Brad?" I ask. That stops him.

And that's really the point, isn't it? There are five sets of consciousness here, but none of us knows which personality belongs to us.

When the drug wears off, I'll be one of these people. But who? Right now I'm Kat. The boys don't like me. They think I'm weird, because I wear black and have my own ideas. They only let me hang around because I'm friends with Alyssa. She's more their type: pretty and popular and — I'm sorry to say it, because she is my friend — vapid. She doesn't even notice when they make fun of her. But still, she's pretty, and looks are all that matter when you're a

girl.

Am I a girl?

If so, let me be Alyssa, not Kat.

I don't want to be Kat.

• • • •

"I'm starting to get a headache," Brad says. "I can feel it coming on."

Conrad grunts, "Good."

Dillon nods. "Yeah, seriously, Brad," he says. "You have no right to be complaining about anything right now."

Brad looks sullen. "I get really bad headaches."

"We know." Conrad sighs. "We've heard." He gets up from the couch and paces around the living room. He wheels on Brad. "See, *this* is why you get picked on. *This* is why no one likes you. You're weak. You whine all the time. You're a — " He turns to Dillon. "What?"

"Hypochondriac?" Dillon offers.

"Yes," Conrad says, pointing. "Thank you. A hypochondriac. We all get headaches, Brad. We deal with them. For you it's like the end of the world."

"Well, you'll see," Brad says angrily. "Tonight, you'll all feel what my headaches are like. And *I'm* used to it. You're not."

Conrad shakes his head. "Whatever. I'm so intimidated." The truth is I'm sick of Brad and his goddamn attitude. He thinks he's so clever, trying to make us feel sorry for him. Well, I didn't start this game, but I can choose to play it *my* way. Let's have some fun with this.

I walk over to Alyssa, take her hand and pull her to her feet. "Come on upstairs," I tell her. "I want to show you something."

Alyssa hesitates. I know what he's thinking. I guess we all do, because this drug is mixing our thoughts together, but even without the drug I would still know, because he's got that *look*. "Come on," he repeats, and pulls me along after him, toward the stairs.

Brad scowls. I should have known. Conrad likes to do her so that we can all hear her moaning, just to let everyone know who she belongs to. Now we'll do a lot more than *hear* them.

Tonight I offer them a chance to get outside themselves, to comprehend our sad situation, to make a new start. And all he can

see is a new opportunity to show us up. I glance at Dillon, who's grinning. "What are you so thrilled about?"

"He's really going to do it," Dillon says. "We're *all* going to. I've always wanted to. And don't tell me you haven't."

Kat looks weak and pale and scared. I *am* scared. I say nothing.

"No," Brad says. "She's an imbecile. I don't find that attractive."

"Liar," Dillon answers. "Everyone wants her." I glance at Kat. "What, no wry observations this time, Kat?" I laugh. "Well, this *is* pretty fucked up," I say. "I don't remember anything like this in Rawls."

Even as I say it, I experience a twinge of self-loathing. I'm such an ass. So cocky, so sarcastic. Why do I act this way?

Because I know that as long as someone *else* is the butt of the joke, it won't be me. How pathetic. For a moment I feel an overwhelming sense of shame. But then I remember I'm not Dillon. At least, probably not. Or maybe I am.

I don't want to be Dillon.

• • • •

Conrad lies in bed, among tangled sheets. I always hate myself, afterward.

My thoughts are terribly lucid, unclouded by the distractions of desire and drink and noise. It's in these moments that I can't escape the truth. My friends are losers. I despise my girlfriend. I stay with her because she's hot, and I hate myself for being so superficial. I'm rich and good-looking and athletic and successful. I've had every advantage, so why can't I do better than *this?* Than these people?

At least the sex was good. That's what I used to think.

But tonight . . . my thoughts kept getting mixed with hers — I *was* her, and I felt nothing but boredom, frustration, a straining to achieve some pleasure, before it was over. And it was over too soon.

That's Brad's fault, I tell myself — him and his goddamn headache. I feel it, in those moments when I'm him, and how are you supposed to perform with a headache like that? Now I have to go back downstairs and face them. They all know. What a miserable night this has turned out to be for Conrad.

For me?

I hope I'm not Conrad.

I look at Alyssa, and know that she knows these thoughts. I don't

care.

Alyssa slips angrily from the bed and starts getting dressed. I almost fall over yanking on my panties, I'm so mad. What a shithead! What a goddamn asshole. "I only stay with you because you buy me things," I tell him over my shoulder. At least I didn't have to fake it this time. I dress in the dark. By the time I've got my clothes on, my mind is made up: I'm dumping him. If I'm Alyssa, I'm definitely dumping him. I mean it this time.

But what if I'm *not* Alyssa? What if I'm Conrad? In that case, maybe I shouldn't dump him. Or rather, Alyssa shouldn't. God, my head hurts to think like this.

The truth is, they're both really sad people, and I don't want to be either one of them. And I realize then that I don't want to be *any* of these people: not Conrad who's arrogant, or Alyssa who's dumb, or Kat who's weird, or Dillon who's sarcastic, or Brad who's whiny.

Is this how the people felt in Rawls' thought experiment? When they were floating free for a time, divorced from the tyranny of identity? Maybe they would choose never to go back. Pure consciousness is an amazing thing, but actual personalities are always broken and unpleasant. It's not fair that our thoughts should be imprisoned in identities.

I start to dread the moment when this wonderful and terrible drug I purchased will begin to fade, and I'll be trapped as one of these people. Now I realize that I've been lost in reverie, and my thoughts have grown too profound to be Alyssa's. Sure enough, I'm Brad again. I glance up as Conrad and Alyssa troop miserably down the stairs.

• • • •

My headaches don't start out that bad, but then they get worse.

A pressure is building along my hairline. Then it starts to squeeze, like someone's wrapped a rope around my brow and is twisting it tighter and tighter. The pain starts to pulse, ranging from bad to unbearable. There's quick, stabbing pain if I move my head. And constant nausea.

For a moment I'm Alyssa, and the pain is gone, but I know it'll be back any moment.

Conrad tells Brad, "Take some pills."

"It won't do any good," Brad says. "It never does."

"Take them!" Conrad barks.

Brad shrugs. I wander over into the bathroom, pain like hammer-blows falling on my temples. I rummage through the medicine cabinet, find some pills, and swallow them. I return to the living room.

"We've got to make this stop," Conrad says.

Dillon nods in agreement. "Hey, Brad," I say. "When is this headache going to wear off?"

"By morning," he replies.

Conrad is incredulous. "By *morning?* No way. There's got to be something we can do."

"The telepathy must have a maximum range," Kat says quietly. "The field — it can't stretch forever."

Conrad nods. "Right, so let's just hop on the yacht and leave him here."

"You can't," Brad says. "I ordered the yacht to do a tune-up. It won't be ready to fly until tomorrow."

Conrad takes three quick steps and shoves Brad hard. "What the hell did you do that for?"

Brad stumbles, recovers his balance. "No one's running away. Not tonight. What's the matter, Conrad? Don't like being me? Or Kat? Or Alyssa? Welcome to the club."

Conrad turns away. He starts to pace furiously.

"Don't you see?" Brad is almost shouting now. "We have a chance here tonight. We can agree on how each of us should be treated, and be bound by that commitment. That's the beauty of the veil of ignorance. For example, we know that Brad really does get terrible headaches, pain that the rest of the group, until tonight, couldn't even imagine. So let's agree to be more sympathetic. Remember, any of you might be Brad."

There are a few moments of awkward silence. Everyone exchanges sideways glances.

Conrad shakes his head. "Screw Brad," I announce. "He's an asshole, and Conrad is going to kick his ass when this is over. And Brad deserves it. Even if I'm Brad, I don't care. He still deserves it." I pause. "I don't think I am, though. How could I be *him?* No way."

Kat rolls her eyes. "You have no way of knowing," I say. "You're being irrational."

"And even if you *are* Conrad," Brad adds, "you still might want to listen." He looks at each of us in turn. "We've all learned some

things tonight about Conrad. He's going to get a lot of shit for that — unless we all agree right now to go easy on him."

Conrad glares at Brad with absolute fury.

Dillon backs out of the way. Strangely enough, in this tense moment, I start thinking about Rawls again — about some of the critiques of his theory. Rawls believed that people subjected to a veil of ignorance would do the rational thing — agree to a society that's fair to everyone. That's what Brad thought too.

But maybe they wouldn't. Maybe people would still set up things like slavery, because each person would simply *gamble* that he'll be the owner and not the slave. It's not the rational thing to do, but people are often not rational — an idea that's foremost in my thoughts as I watch the crazed expression coming over Conrad.

Over *me.* The pain of Brad's headache is driving me absolutely insane. *Brad* is driving me absolutely insane. I want it to stop, I want *him* to stop. Anything, to make it stop.

But Brad's just standing there with his smug grin. "I told you my headaches were bad, but you wouldn't listen. You never listen to me because you're a spoiled asshole. But now you see I'm right. Who's weak now, huh? Who's the one who can't take it?"

I lunge for him. "Don't you come to *my* house and talk to *me* like that." I punch Brad, who goes down, and I fall on top of him, and start slamming his shoulders against the floor. Then my fingers find Brad's throat and start to choke him. "If he's unconscious," I announce furiously, "then we won't have to feel his headache, or his weakness, or his goddamn resentment."

Alyssa starts screaming.

Kat leaps forward and tries to drag Conrad off, but he's too big. "Stop it!" I yell at him. "You're going to kill him!" Dillon stands by doing nothing. He's frozen. Just contemplating the theoretical implications of this strangling.

Conrad's grip tightens. I'm squeezing. I hear Kat's words and realize that she's right, I *am* going to kill him. It has this awful sense of inevitability, because I hate him so much, despise him. I have no choice. But it's not really me doing it, is it? At least, probably it's not.

Brad's thrashing is growing weaker. And now everything's going dark and numb, like my head's being dipped in ice water. I can't see. I hardly notice the pain in my neck anymore. I know I'm going to die and I don't want to die. I mean, I really, really don't want to

die here on this floor, but then I realize that it's not *me* that's dying. *Brad* is dying and I'm not him. At least, I'm probably not. Or maybe I am.

I don't want to be Brad.

• • • •

I'm screaming.

Because I'm dead.

I'm dead I'm dead. I'm Brad and I'm dead.

I felt it, that moment when life stopped, that instant when it ended. *Don't think don't think about it.*

I'm screaming. I can't be dead if I'm screaming and three other people are screaming, too: Conrad is screaming and Dillon is screaming and Kat is screaming, and I look down at my body and see that I'm Alyssa.

No, I'm Conrad now, and I make myself stop screaming. Stop it. Just stop.

I make myself look at Brad.

He's on his back — arms splayed, legs splayed. I can't see his face. His head is turned away. All I see is a mess of dark, curly hair.

But now I'm Kat and now I *can* see his face. Oh God, his eyes are open. They're *staring.* I throw a hand over my mouth and turn away.

Conrad pivots, stomps a few steps, circles back. Then I *am* Conrad and my life is over. Ruined. How could this happen? How could this possibly happen? Brad's headache ended along with his life and now my thoughts are clear and sharp and cold. Very, very cold.

Alyssa's palms are pressed against her temples. "You killed him!" I shout.

Kat moves toward the computer. "I'm calling for help."

Conrad shouts, "No."

Dillon holds out a hand. "Wait."

Kat comes to a stop. Watching. Guarded.

"Let me think a second." Dillon starts to pace. I'm Alyssa waiting, then Conrad waiting, and then Kat when he says, "We've got to cover it up."

"No," I tell him.

"Think, Kat," Dillon says softly. "What if *you're* Conrad?"

“Then I’ll pay the price.” But even as I say it, I feel a twinge of doubt. What if I really am Conrad? I try to imagine what it would be like if the drug finally wore off and I looked down and saw Conrad’s body — my body, maybe — standing alone. I can’t. I can’t. It’s too much.

Alyssa fidgets. “What are we going to do?” I ask.

“Cover it up,” Dillon explains. He takes a deep breath. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Any one of us might be Conrad. So we all swear right now never to tell anybody. No one knows Brad was here. We dispose of the body, and for all anyone knows he was eaten by one of those Callipsarian scumbags he always hung out with.”

Conrad steps forward. “Anyway, it would serve him right if that *had* happened,” I say, awkwardly. “This whole thing was his fault. It’s the drug that did it all. What was he thinking . . . slipping us some fucked up alien drug?”

Dillon turns and gazes at Kat. “Come on,” I prod her. “It’s the only way.” I know she’ll break. I was her just a second ago. She can’t go to jail. She won’t.

“All right,” she whispers, in a hollow voice.

Alyssa agrees, too. “Okay,” I say. “Okay, let’s do that.”

Conrad nods. “I’ll load him into my yacht. As soon as it’s ready to fly, we swing into a low orbit and launch the body down into Hades-3. It won’t last a second down there.”

“Fine,” Dillon says. “Go. Do it.” Conrad takes Brad’s body under the armpits and starts to drag.

Kat wanders over to the window again and looks down at the planet. I used to think it was so amazing, so awe-inspiring. Now I look at those red bands and feel only horror. I can’t look away. I know that for the rest of my life I’m going to remember this sight, and remember Brad, and be afraid.

I’ll turn Conrad in. Whatever I say now, whatever I promise, it’s a lie. If the drug wears off and I’m not Conrad, I’ll turn him in. I have to.

But what if I *am* Conrad? Then I can’t trust Kat. Then I have to do something about Kat.

Conrad stops. He tosses Brad’s body aside. Dillon stands totally still. They’re both staring at me.

Dillon sighs. “So much for that plan.” We can’t trust Kat not to talk. I should know, I was just her.

“Get rid of *her,* too,” Conrad grumbles. It’s the first thing to pop into my head, but even before it’s out of my mouth, I realize the problem, which Dillon kindly points out.

“What if *you’re* Kat?” he says.

I groan. “So what do we do?”

Dillon thinks for a minute. “I have an idea,” he says.

Then I *am* Dillon, and it’s my idea.

A terrible, terrible idea.

But it’s the only thing I can think of.

• • • •

We wait for a Callipsarian dealer that Conrad knows. I’m Conrad and Alyssa and Dillon and Kat and Conrad and Alyssa and Dillon and Kat. No one says anything. It seems to go on forever.

It *will* go on forever.

The Callipsarian docks its yacht. I’m Kat when it enters the room. It’s taller than any of us, sinuous, and it smells like an ozone sea. I’ve never seen one whose mottled tentacles were such a dark shade of purple, or whose three eyes blazed such a bright and terrible yellow. It regards us.

Conrad shows it the pipe. “We want more of this,” I demand.

The Callipsarian snatches the pipe, and examines it.

“Enough to last a decade,” Dillon adds. “Enough to last forever, if we need it to.”

The Callipsarian is very accommodating. “Tell your friends,” it rasps. “Plenty to go around. Enough for every last human, if they want it.”

After the Callipsarian leaves, Dillon offers the pipe to Kat. “There’s enough in here to keep us going for weeks.”

She hesitates.

Dillon scowls. “Take it, Kat. Otherwise, it’s a one in four chance of being Conrad. Only you and only Conrad. Your choice.”

Kat takes the pipe. I smoke it. So do the others. Now I’ll never betray Conrad. I might be him.

It occurs to me later, when I’m Dillon, that maybe Brad succeeded, in some sick way. Kat or Dillon or Alyssa would have turned in Conrad in a second. But behind the veil of ignorance, we all agreed to help him out, and we always will. It’s too bad Brad isn’t around to see it. I’m glad I wasn’t him, at least.

Sometimes I wonder who I am.
Not that it matters.
Not anymore.

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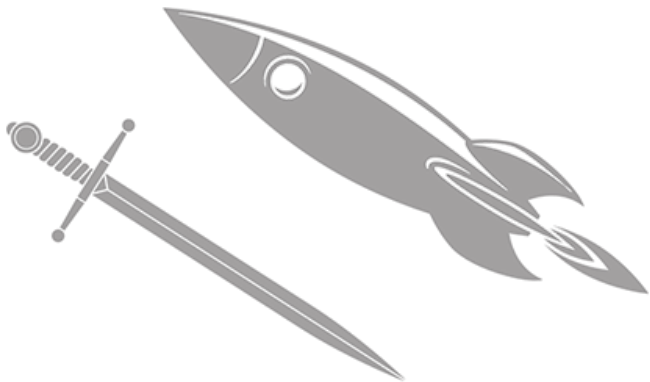
To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

FANTASY



The Girl Who Ate Butterflies

Mary Rickert

I

Her mother carved angels in the backyard. The largest was six feet tall and had the face of her mother's first lover, killed in a car accident when they were still in their teens. It took eighteen months to sway the purple and blue webbed stone into wings and skin, to release the wisp of feathers from the metallic clasp. She carved through the seasons, the easy spring, the heat of summer. In autumn she moved closer to the garage and plugged in the space heater, and in winter she wiped the white ash, that was what she called it, from his broad shoulders and unformed brow and in fingerless gloves carved him with a heat that flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

The smallest angel was no larger than Lantanna's pinky and it was for the memory of an aborted fetus. Lantanna had heard the woman whisper her request through the closed door on a dark and moonless night. "I know I made the right decision," she said, "but still, I feel empty. I want something to mark the absence. A little angel for the one I sent past. Can you carve it a girl? Can you make her face at peace?" Lantanna stood shivering in the kitchen doorway, unnoticed by her mother who listened with a passive expression to the stranger behind the door. "And one last thing?" whispered the voice. "As you carve will you say a prayer, or whatever, for me. Though I'm sure I made the right choice."

Lantanna turned and walked back to bed. She shivered into her blankets and wrapped them around herself, tight as a cocoon, and fell asleep again without her mother even noticing she had awakened. In her home, as in her life, Lantanna, like a shadow, was rarely noticed.

She was the sort of girl who did not know she was pretty. A pale face with the lightest scattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. Pale blue eyes the color of dreams. Hair the color of corn.

She wore summer dresses from the 1940s (regardless of the

season), thirty years after that time, but unmended and clean as if they had never been worn before. She also wore a slip, which was also not the fashion. The dresses were airy as wings, so thin that the slip straps with paper-clip-looking adjusters could be seen through them, as well as the flower at her chest, a squashed tiny pink or white or yellow rose. In the winter she wore little sweaters, the kind with three-quarter-length sleeves and pearl buttons, while the other students at Oakdale High were ripping their jeans and rubbing their new sneakers in dirt. She was pretty but not fashionably so. Hardly anyone noticed. Really, only one.

Quetzl lived in Oakdale in the summer with his father who worked in the city and provided little supervision or restraint. A rare, dark-skinned creature in the town of apple-white, he spent the summers playing his guitar and smoking pot. He watched Lantanna from a distance, first as something vaguely noticed, a blur of color in a vision of black and white, then, with more focus, as she took her daily stroll early each morning past his house, always and mysteriously (in that age when most moved in packs) alone. “She’s a space cadet,” his friend Emma told him once when she saw him watching Lantanna. But he watched with growing fascination, because in the dull, same-paced world of Oakdale, Lantanna was different, and because he was different, too, he recognized her as one of his kind.

The day it began, Lantanna went to her mother with blood-stained panties. Her mother looked up from the dusty white chiseling to say, “This is the blood of a broken heart all women suffer. It is inevitable. Wounds must bleed.” Then, when Lantanna began to cry, scolded, “You should be happy. This is good. You will have a long, pain-filled life.”

She showed Lantanna the box of tampons and demonstrated how to use them, watching as she did, tapping her fingers to get back to her work. Lantanna inserted the thin, white cardboard-sheathed cotton with a stab of discomfort and in a tremulous voice asked if she was still a virgin. Yes, yes, her mother nodded. “Though it doesn’t matter. Time is relative. After all,” she said, “you already have the wound.”

Following her mother’s instructions, Lantanna washed the blood from her fingers and panties with cold water and yellow soap. By the time she left for her morning walk, her mother was back in the yard absorbed with angel and stone. Lantanna walked past in

silence, absorbed in her own study of astral realities. What, she wondered, made true angel wings? Were they gossamer and thinner than glass like butterflies' wings, or were they heavy with flesh and feathers, coursed with veins and blood?

She did not notice Quetzl following her. And he, so absorbed in the swing of her pale pink dress, the arch of her long legs to the drop of short, white slip, did not realize Emma followed him, her eyes glinting with fire.

• • • •

When Lantanna got to the meadow, she walked into the tall grass and lay down. Quetzl stopped at the edge of the meadow and lay down, too. At some distance, Emma stood in the shadow of trees that bordered the meadow.

Lantanna lay still. Her arms raised. Her hands like little white stars fallen into the grass. He could only see moments of her face. A small butterfly flitted in the bush nearby, but she did not turn her head or move, only lay there as still and disinterested as a flower. More butterflies flitted nearby. A small orange one lit on her wrist. A tiny blue one hovered at her lips but he blinked and in that moment it was gone. Passion rose in him like Jesus' winged heart in the picture over his grandmother's bed.

From her distance, it is as if Emma is suddenly sainted, a person who sees spirits and changes in the soul. Seeing nothing that can be described like this, she knows Quetzl has fallen in love with Lantanna. She feels a particular response in her own chest. An expansion of desire, the way flame swells to explode.

Lantanna, in the meadow, knows nothing of those who watch. Lying in the grass, her white arms extended like stems, her hands flower, her little mouth open with one small lilac bloom on her tongue, parched to swallow, dry in the hot sun, her heart beats like the quick wings of the sleepy orange that flits about her and finally lights on her wrist. A small blue hovers at her lips, darts in and out, in a maddening tease before it rests on the lilac bloom. Quickly, she closes her mouth, tastes the fluttering wings. She chews and hears the vaguest crunch of its small body and, treasuring its quick flavor minced with the lilac, swallows. Sighing, she lets her tired arms fall. Eyes closed, she feels the hot sun, the vague itch of meadow grass, hears the insect hum. But the pulse of her heart is the loudest and

most vibrant sensation, as if it is filled with all the butterflies she's swallowed since she was a little girl. Wings beating in a blood cocoon. Bursting to be free.

• • • •

When Lantanna rises from the meadow grass and turns to walk home, Quetzl follows. But Emma does not follow them. She waits until they are out of sight and then walks to the meadow, which is bright at the edge of summer with wild flowers and butterflies, alive with an energy she can describe with only one metaphor. Emma stands at the edge of the meadow, at just about the spot, she estimates, Quetzl lay in. Where the grass looks flattened she bends to touch it, as if it is a holy space, as if by placing her palm where he lay she can touch him. She closes her eyes. Yes, she thinks, she can feel his heat. Then, she lies there, too, turns her head to see his vision through the grass, the spear of blades at crosshatch, the flitting of colors, wings, and petals. Here, she knows, he lay and watched Lantanna. Lantanna! Emma rises quickly when she realizes she has been lying in the meadow just like that space cadet. She forgives Quetzl for this. He is bewitched, it is obvious. Everyone knows Lantanna comes from a family of witches.

Emma comes from a family of fire fighters. Her father was a volunteer fireman for the Oakdale Fire Department before he mysteriously disappeared on his way to work two years ago. Almost exactly two years ago, Emma thinks. She remembers the hot tears, the new pain in her mother's eyes. She remembers the first realization of the woman's disappearance that same morning. She wished, for a long time after, that she had paid her more attention. She remembers a vague slash of red lips, dark hair, heavy perfume in church. But she cannot remember more than this. At this point, she can barely remember him.

Emma reaches in her pocket. She pulls out the lighter. She flicks the top with her thumb, expertly. Emma has a secret. She is the girl who loves fire. She used to start fires to make her father come. No matter what time of day or night, how impossible it was for him to be home for supper, how terribly too tired he was for her or her mother, if there was a fire, he was there. Vibrant. Heroic. She used to watch in awe this strange aspect of him, the strength of his stance, the sternness of his face, his power. Now Emma reaches

down. With a quick movement she brushes the flame across the grass in front of her. It sizzles, small as a stitch, but she watches it grow in the tangle of grass. She runs quickly to the edge of the woods as the smoke and flame rise behind her, like phantom snakes and devils' tongues.

She runs to the trees at the edge of the meadow and climbs one. The bark scratches her fingers and she tears a pant leg in her rush. But she barely notices such minor pain. Though it has been two years since he left them, it is at moments like these that she feels closest to her father. There is the same rush of excitement, the same heat of anticipation that used to bring him. Now she can relish the feeling. It is almost like having him back again. The meadow burns. A late afternoon breeze pushes it farther. Emma feels the sting of smoke in her eyes. Strains to hear the sound of sirens. Emma climbs higher. She can see the dirt street, the distant houses. Fire snakes through the grass below. Her eyes sting. Her throat tightens. Even the tree is hot. She feels the pores of her skin open and tears weep out. Her hands tighten to hold the limb, her fingers strain like bird claws, the bones pressed against the skin. Smoke fills her lungs with pain. The flames reach for her. She screams. She feels she screams, but she hears no sound other than fire.

Suddenly. He is there, in his suspenders and baggy, yellow fire pants. He stands at the edge of the limb. Graceful as a star balanced on its point. He is saying her name over and over again. *Emma, Emma, Emma.* He extends one hand to her; with the other, he parts the sky. She can see just past him a blue and gentle day at the edge of summer. *Emma, Emma,* he says, *Come.* She stands. She stretches her hand to touch his. The limb creaks. *Come,* he says. He parts the smoke and flame with one hand. Reaches for her with the other. She strains to touch him. She hears a sound like a branch breaking and suddenly she is falling. Falling. On fire. Where? In the blur of heat and pain she forms this final thought. Where? Where are you now?

II

It is a long winter. It snows every day and the air is brittle. When the sun shines, it sharpens the points of ice that hang from the eaves like daggered teeth.

Lantanna's mother carves a graveyard angel for the girl who died

in the fire. She thinks Emma and Lantanna were friends because of the way Lantanna cried and cried. She wept for days and nights. She would eat nothing but tears.

Lantanna's mother tried to comfort her. "You have to stop crying. You have to make the decision. Death is inevitable," she said. "Joy is not. You have to choose."

Of course there had been other winters. Long months when the meadow was frozen and the butterflies gone. Lantanna suffered through those other winters but only by counting the full moons until summer. Now, she cannot count, for she does not know when the meadow will be alive again.

Quetzl sends her letters. Many, many letters. He writes of beauty, desire, and loss. He wrote, *The lesson of the fire is that we must accept we all burn. I burn for you. I go to sleep with the memory of your eyes. Do they remember me?*

Only vaguely. She had been surprised when, on that last summer day, he had come up from somewhere behind her on the path and introduced himself. He had begun speaking strangely almost immediately. He told her he had been watching her. Then he said he would make her a light lunch of butterfly pasta.

But of course, it wasn't butterflies at all, only bow-shaped pasta sprinkled with parmesan and melted butter, and she did not even taste it, because the fire engines screamed past and she looked down the road in the direction they traveled and saw that the sky was a bright orange of fluttering blues and wings and she knew that the meadow was on fire. Of course, they wouldn't let her near it. She heard them talking about a body, whom she later learned was the girl, Emma. Whenever Lantanna tried to picture Emma, even after she saw her face in the newspaper, she could only hold the image for a fleeting moment. It was true, she was haunted. But not by the death of Emma.

At night she dreamt the fluttering of wings brushed her cheeks and teased her lips.

And it was strange, in the way that strange things happen, that just when she was at her worst, suffering the despair of what was lost from her life forever (some things should be certain, an appetite fed, for instance) that, though she had not answered a single letter, Quetzl came to her, knocking at the door in the midst of another winter storm. He found her wan and pale, shivering in her too-thin dress. She invited him in and brought him to warm by the fire but

he could see that she was suffering, and his love sank to the depths of her despair, and he felt it within him, in the place where Emma died, a greater widening of the emptiness. He implored her to eat and removed from his knapsack a bruised peach, a flattened sandwich, a brown-spotted banana, but she wanted none of it. In desperation he moved her closer to the flame where he discovered he could see, not just through the thin fabric of her pale yellow dress to the wisp of shape beneath, but through her skin to the blue course of veins and delicate bones.

He found Lantanna's mother in the garage, huddled near the space heater, carving an angel who looked vaguely familiar. He watched for a long time her intense carving, before he approached, saying, "You give more attention to this statue than you do your own daughter." At which she did not pause but continued to carve, the scrape of metal against stone shrill to his ears. "Did you hear me?" he asked.

"I heard you."

"Well?" he said. "What kind of mother are you? Can't you see what's happening?"

At this the woman laughed. "I see what's happening," she said. "You're happening. And if she can survive you, perhaps she'll live."

"Survive me?" Quetzl sputtered indignantly. "I love her."

"You destroy her."

"I save her," he said, and then turned on his heels, muttering, "Standing here talking to a crazy old witch," he walked out of the garage into the storm.

That night he returned with a car and took Lantanna and a suitcase he directed her to pack and drove through the white snow sifting the sky, soft as petals. "Where are we going?" she asked, suddenly aware that she was confused.

"Mexico," he said.

"But why?"

She slept. When she woke, it was light. He offered her a hamburger and this she refused but she ate some of the lettuce and the tomato so he was pleased. The stars were white-bright, intense. She slept. When she woke again a hot sun followed them. Her cheeks were wet, and she sniffed at her own scent, salty, musty. He drove with a grim resolve, stopping to piss, to kiss her mouth that she was embarrassed tasted of her own bad breath. "Mexico?" she said, and he shrugged his shoulders and nodded as if, yes, it was

strange, but somehow inevitable. “Why, we’re driving into summer,” she said. At night they slept in rest stops where she washed her armpits, and feet, and crotch, and wet a comb through her hair, and still she felt wild somehow and could not wash or neaten the feeling away. She’d squint into the dimpled, mysterious rest-stop mirrors and try to see the change reflected there, the strange strength that grew inside her, and she looked at his face and came to believe she saw it in his profile, too. Wild. Free.

When they got to the border there was a wait of traffic and it was the first time she entered another country and she did not know it would be so much like an amusement park. Tijuana was strange, bright with color, and cheap, but he kept driving past chain-link fences with holes cut out of them that marked the border, past cardboard-and-tire shacks with the blue light of a TV inside, past the fish stands, and women with babies, begging. He stopped only to look at the map and she began to think that this was not love, not love at all, but some sort of obsession until just then he said, “We’re here. I think.” But it was dark and so they slept until morning showed them the edge of the jungle and they followed the strange trail she could not object to because it was inevitable until at last they stood at the top of the hill and he waved his hand across the expanse of valley below. “Here,” he said, “I give you this.” She had to squint and not really look at all before she saw that the spotted trees quivered with red and black wings, thousands and thousands, so what could she do but walk into them? They lit on her, in her hair, on her hands. They fluttered against her skin. “Monarchs,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “For you.”

“Monarchs,” she said again.

“Because you love them.”

Monarchs flitted against her skin and hair. Each touch reminded her of the loss.

“Now you see how I love you,” he said. “I left home. I stole the car. I did everything for you. Because I know you miss the butterflies. I would do anything for you. I would die for you.”

“But . . .” She could not continue. She saw the bright light in his eyes and could not cast it out with the venomous truth. He saw the tears in her eyes and mistook them for joy. He broke the distance between them and kissed her with the passion of a thousand wings, of an exile, of an appetite starved.

She returned the kiss with her own pain. Poisonous. All these butterflies, she thought, and not one of them edible. His tongue fluttered in her mouth. She had to concentrate not to bite down. He pressed against her. His hot hands on her thighs, her panties stretched tight as his fingers wiggled inside, eager, one tip, wet, there. She groaned. His other hand pushed the panties down. Yes, why not, she thought. Anything, anything to stop the sound of wings.

"Oh, Lantanna," he said. "I will love you forever."

But this she could not believe. Even as she lay on the jungle ground, monarchs fluttering against her skin and brushing her hands, even as she arched to meet the stab of pleasure, even later in the car where it happened again, and at the rest stops, beneath the desert stars, even as he risked arrest to drive her home because she missed her mother, even though she knew he meant to, she also knew he could not love her forever, for he did not love her now, not really. Not knowing her secret, not understanding her appetite, how could she believe he loved her at all?

III

When they returned to Oakdale, Quetzl was arrested. They talked of arresting Lantanna, but Quetzl said she did not know he'd stolen the car. Lantanna did not want to go to prison, so she did not argue for truth.

Winter melted. Quetzal wrote to Lantanna every day. Every day she read his mysterious, passionate letters and wept.

Finally, she took the bus and hitchhiked to the county jail.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"I took the bus and hitchhiked," she said.

"I don't want you hitchhiking. It's dangerous."

"Anyway," she said, to change the subject.

"No. Not anyway. I'll end this visit," he said, "if you don't promise. Promise me you will not hitchhike again."

"Quetzl."

"Promise."

"You're not understanding."

"What am I not understanding? I love you. I want you safe."

"No," Lantanna said. "That's not what I mean. What you don't understand is I won't promise you anything. I am not the one," she

said. “You need me. Let’s just be clear about this. You need me. And I don’t need you. So don’t make threats that hurt only yourself.”

Quetzl waved for the guard.

Dear Lantanna,

Yes. I need you. Beautiful, beautiful girl. I love you. I need you for your beauty. Your love of beauty. Come visit. Tell me you love me. I live to hear you say it. I would do anything for you. I would die for you. But I don’t want you to die for me. I just want you to be safe. Come back to me. I love you. I love you. I love you. Say it.

• • • •

The second visit.

“How did you get here?” he asks.

“I took the bus and hitchhiked,” she says.

“I just want you to be safe.”

“How can you love me,” she says, “if you don’t believe I want the same thing for myself?”

“Lantanna, I love you. Tell me what you want. Tell me what will make you love me.”

“Well,” she says, “that’s a start. Finally, you ask. There are things about me. Things you do not even guess. I have many secrets and there is one that really matters. I’ve never shared it with anyone. I’ve never known anyone who would understand.”

“Yes. Me. I love you. You can tell me anything.”

“This I have to show you.”

“Then show me.”

“I can’t show you here.”

“Will you wait for me?”

“How can I answer? How can I know?”

• • • •

Several nights later she is awakened. “Quetzl?”

“I escaped,” he says. “But they’ll find me. They’ll come here. We have to go.”

“What?” she says. “Is this your gift to me? I don’t want to go to prison for helping you to escape.”

“No, no. Didn’t I tell you?” He sits beside her on the bed. He

grabs her arm and she feels the pulse and weight of his passion. "You never wrote, you only visited twice, and when you came we fought. I have this all planned. You tell them I kidnapped you. If we're caught you tell them that. See, I have this rope. Let me tie you up."

"You must think I am really stupid."

"Lantanna," he begs. "Trust me. All I've ever done is love you. I am here because I love you. I escaped so you could show me your secret."

"It's not here," Lantanna says. "It's not in this room." She sees now that he is sweating. She sees fear in his eyes.

"Lantanna, please."

It isn't that she really believes he loves her but because she hopes he does, that she agrees. He ties her wrists to the bedposts. She watches his profile as he does. So serious in his work he does not seem to notice her. With the final knot he kisses her. "I won't do this, if you don't want me to," he says as he lifts her thin nightgown.

When he kisses her, she kisses back. It is wonderful, she thinks, to only lie there. He is hungry. It has been a long time and she knows about appetites. He is touching her everywhere. As if his hands had wings. She closes her eyes and tries to feel only these feelings and forget, for a while, the longing, the empty hunger, her own appetite.

Afterward, he takes the silver scissors shaped like a bird from her dresser and saws through the rope. It dangles on the posts and the loops bracelet her wrists. When they stand up together there is a wet spot exposed on the bed. "That's good," he says, "it looks like I raped you."

It is getting light. They sneak down the stairs together as if Lantanna lived in a house with the sort of parent who would interfere.

She takes him down the path, past his father's house, past the burnt trees of last summer's fire, to the meadow, which is stubby as a bad haircut but sprite with flowers.

"I didn't know it would grow back so quickly," he says.

She lies down. She ignores him. He finds this moving, that she has let him in so close now that he can see what she is alone. She picks a bud and puts it in her mouth. He is fascinated. This small gesture he had not seen before. She raises her arms, the knotted

rope bracelets her wrists, her hands are like little white stars fallen into the meadow grass. The early morning strengthens with heat. He is restless. But she is still and he has learned patience from her stillness.

Finally, a very small, yellow butterfly begins to flit about. It lands on the rope.

He thinks, This beautiful girl.

It flits around her lips.

Beautiful, beautiful.

It lands on the bud in her mouth.

Beauti —

She snaps her mouth shut. Chews. Swallows. She looks at him.

He looks at her.

She covers her face with her hands, like a child, as if by not seeing him she disappears. When she removes them, he is still watching her. She cannot bear what she sees. She closes her eyes.

"Go away," she says.

"I can help you."

"No. Go away."

"But I love you," he says.

She looks at him.

"Really," he says.

"And this?" she gestures toward her mouth.

"I'll help you," he says. "I'll stick by you while you work it out."

"This is not a problem," she says. "This is my appetite."

He bends to kiss her, but just above her mouth, hesitates.

"Don't worry," she says, "they don't fly back out."

She closes her eyes. For a long time the only sound is the scrying of bugs. Then she hears the sound of his feet like a scythe, cutting through the meadow grass.

Now, everything is different. She does what she has never done before. She picks another bud. Places it in her mouth. Today she will eat until she has enough. A small blue flits about. She waits. Waits. Waits. It lands on her tongue. Wings fluttering. She bites. In the distance, she hears sirens. Chews. Yes, everything is different now. Swallows. It even tastes different. It tastes better.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Rickert's stories have been appearing regularly in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* for several years, starting in 1999 with her first publication, "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies." Her work has also appeared in *SCI FICTION* and the anthologies *Wastelands, Poe,* and *Feeling Very Strange.* A new collection of her short fiction, *Holiday,* came out in 2010. Her first collection, *Map of Dreams,* won the World Fantasy Award and the William L. Crawford Award for best first book-length work of fantasy, and her story, "Journey to the Kingdom" won her another World Fantasy Award and was also a finalist for the Nebula Award, the Stoker, British SF, and Shirley Jackson awards.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

And the Winners Will Be Swept Out to Sea

Maria Dahvana Headley

I'm in your house, wearing one of your shirts. I'm sitting on your floor, with all the drawers of every desk and dresser open. I have them poured out and I'm looking at what you've kept. Your old laptops and love letters, your hard drives full of photos and emails, your string and wire tangled into little knots, hard and tiny, twisted so tightly that I can't crush them more than they've already been crushed.

I've let a fox move into your upstairs. She walked into your flat one day, and I waved her past. Now she has kits in the bedroom closet, nested with your sweaters. There are bats in the basement, but they're from before you left. My heart is full of hammers. I don't understand how you could've left me here, with your keys, and your bed, with your bookshelves. I have my own place too, but you left me in yours when you went.

I have a little pile of metal animals. I have a bunch of things you gave me, things I hung around my neck. I have bracelets that hook to chains, and out in the back there's a rock with a view of the water.

Sometimes, when I sit out there, I see the monster under the surface, the tension scraping over its scales. It's big. What I can see of it is only a spine, or a tail, sometimes, and then it's gone. I sit on that rock, looking over the edge, and think about how I used to love swimming. When I was a girl, I could hold my breath for a month. I'd sit on the bottom of a river in the mud, or on the pebbles, and wait for the season to change. Once I tried to come up but the river had frozen, and I ended up swimming just under the surface for a while, waiting, waiting, until I found a fisherman by seeing his shadow. The fisherman had made a hole in the ice. He was crouched beside it, with a thermos and a fishing pole, and I rose up naked from beneath him. I took him in my arms, and he screamed with such terror that ice cracked elsewhere, a spiderweb of fractures, trees black and leaning, wolves howling, and his blood in

my mouth. I was not sorry.

There used to be laws about this, but there aren't any longer. No one could bring me to court to tell me I can't have you. No one could force me onto a stand and question me. I look down, off the cliff behind your house, and I see that dark shape waiting, but it never rises up.

Your neighbor came over for tea and you fucked her once a long time ago, if I have any skill at reading these things.

"Are you okay?" she asked me, and I said I was not.

"You don't imagine everything," I said. "You think you might have imagined everything that could happen to love, but you can't. There are more things that can happen than I thought," I told her, and she nodded.

We sat together at the table in your kitchen, next to the dishwasher, and it hummed and rattled. I looked at the teapot between us and thought about fucking her too, to see what it would be like, to see what you saw in her, but the tea was too strong, and she looked at me with too much kindness.

"He's not everything," she said. "I should know."

I don't think I'd ever weave with thread. I think I'd only weave with metal. I think I'm the kind of woman who makes chains, not cloth. I am no abandoned wife, and you are no husband lost at sea. You're not at sea. The bottom of the sea is full of broken chains that used to hold anchors to ships and trenches where they tried to lay cable. The bottom of the sea is full of bones and garbage.

A long time ago, I used to know an old man who'd built a boat. He'd made it out of plastic bottles, and he decided to sail around the world. He came from a family of circus performers, and all of them went with him. The whole family took to the sea, in their boats made of bottles. Out in the middle of the Atlantic, I saw one of his sons juggling fire, and a daughter, doing back flips from raft to raft, flying through the air like a fish. They'd lost their sense of direction and had no way home. All they had were sails made of shirts and skin, and they stood and acted as masts for their father's ship.

I swam up to the father's boat, and said "Will you apologize to me now?"

He said he would not.

He'd married me, and then forgotten it, and I wanted him to forget the rest of his life if he'd been so quick to forget loving me.

Finally, though, I relented. He sailed with his starving family for a year and a day, eating raw fish and drinking rain, and one day I forgave him and let him find shore. I'd met him in a tank where I'd been playing a mermaid and he'd been playing a sailor, a theme park in Florida, and he was nineteen and I was not.

I thought I was the only thing like me, not in the world, but in the area. I thought I would know if I saw another, but I didn't. I wonder now how many times I've walked past people in the street who were not people. I wonder if they knew me for what I was.

I was walking into bars in those days, and meeting lovers over ice cubes. I was wandering into hotel bathrooms, and when the taps turned on, I'd smile at strangers through the water. Sometimes I'd take one home with me, and other times I'd leave them. It was easier then. People drowned all the time in their beds. There were years of water mattresses, and in them I found peace. There was a beautiful aquarium in one apartment, as large as a wall, warm water, lit from below. There were gutters too, of course, every city has them, storm drains and canals, but I didn't need gutters. There were times in my past when outdoors was the only way to do it, but the cities are plumbed now.

You have no aquarium and no bathtub. You only have a shower, and I stand in it, with the water at the hottest setting, writing in the fog on the glass doors. I keep the bracelets on when I shower. I keep them on all the time. I've been looking for a key, but I haven't been trying as hard as I might be. Somewhere in this flat there's no doubt a box full, but if I tried them all I still might not want my freedom. The bracelets are beautiful. They're gold and covered in writing. When you gave them to me, I thought you'd bought them in an antique store, but you hadn't. You'd had them a long time. They were from your family.

"Do you like them?" you asked me, and I drank the rest of my wine and held out my wrists.

"For the rock?" I asked.

"It's part of the thing," you said, and shrugged, giving me an embarrassed half-smile. "You don't have to do it. It's just a silly thing."

You weren't sleeping much, and hadn't been. You were talking too fast. Things were wrong, but I didn't know how to fix them. I kept trying to hold you down and love you, and you kept telling me you loved me too, but that you were messed up.

Down there, off the cliff and on the sand, they hold a festival every year. I don't know who *they* are. It's called End Beach, and the festival's supposed to be a big deal. People camp for days, and drink and take drugs and make art. There's no cash, just sacrifices. You perform one, and then someone gives you one in return. At the end of the festival, the winners, the ones who've spent the whole festival proving what they're made of, get swept out to sea. There's a pageant, and that's the prize. A few people every year win instead of going home. Sometimes the winners are famous artists, and sometimes they're finance men. Sometimes they're young lovers. It all depends on who has the most to lose, and who's most willing to lose it in public.

Everyone leaves letters to be opened by their families in case, but it's apparently an honor to make that sacrifice for art and glory. I don't go. It's an old festival. The people in this part of the world have been doing it for centuries, you told me, when I first asked you about it, and I said "Huh. Always the swept out to sea part too?"

"That's the fun part," you said.

Last summer, I stayed up here and watched it, but I mostly could only see flags and banners, and at night the campfires burning. The day after it was all done, I looked out to sea with binoculars, but I couldn't see anyone. The beach was all covered with blood from sacrificing, and pizza boxes from delivery. There are a couple of places that make a year's income on the last night of the End Beach festival. I hired some people to clean it up when nobody else did.

I let myself slip down the drain after a while in the shower, and swim around in the dark beneath the city, but there's no one there I want. I come back up the hill in the morning, dripping and filthy, and get directly back into the shower with a mug of tea already in my hand. I drink it as I wash, letting it tan me from the inside. It tastes like you.

A few years ago, I lived for a while in a sushi restaurant, the dish in the fish, on my back in the tank, allowing algae to grow beneath me. Sometimes people looked at me funny, but mostly they didn't notice. I'd talk to them occasionally, tell fortunes or lies. This is how I met you. You were the vegetarian at the sushi bar. You looked into my tank and said, "What the hell?"

"I'm fine," I said.

You tried to mobilize the chef, all the waiters, but I was comfortable. I wasn't planning on leaving. If someone selected me

for dinner, I thought I'd be happy to be served, but a lot of customers thought I was poisonous, and even the ones who loved risk were too scared.

"You're not fine. You're getting out of that tank," you said, and put your arms in up to the elbows, working your fingers in at my sides. "That's what we know. That tank, among other things, isn't big enough."

"I'm fine," I protested again. I had grown to the glass and my skin felt delicate, but you dislodged me, wrapped me in napkins, and took me home.

When you stopped sleeping and when you stopped eating, it wasn't like I was going to leave you. I tried to work my own fingers into the places where you could still feel them, but you told me you were fine, and refused to talk about it anymore. At sunrise, I'd find you staring out the windows, and you'd jump when I said your name, like your name wasn't a name you knew.

"That's only the sun rising," I'd say.

"Another day," you'd say back, and I'd hand you your tea and curl up beside you, but you weren't exactly there, and the sky inside your brain was dark all the time, like the sun was dead.

"Nothing gets better," you'd say. "It only gets worse. I'm not good for you. I'm dragging you down."

"I can swim," I'd say, but you'd just look at me while your tea got cold. "Then drag me down," I'd say. "I know how to do that too. You're not the only one."

Instead you went running, and ran and ran around the island trying to corral all your dark inside a ring.

We got into a fight and I took off into the rain, splitting myself into a million pieces while you watched from the front porch.

"Can't you just hold your breath?" I shouted, from out of the storm, and you told me you couldn't do anything.

"Just hold your breath and wait for another season," I tried to tell you. I could feel spring coming. I'd been down the hill to the neighborhood on the other side of the park, and in it there was a deep pond full of fish. They were all coming back to the surface after the winter. Most of them had survived. I'd stood on one foot in the icy water and looked down at them as they looked up at me, their little orange eyes and white fins.

"Come down to End Beach with me," you said.

You weren't even wearing a shirt. You were standing in the

doorway, this tall, handsome guy in your underwear, your chest hairy as a pelt. You didn't seem like anyone who'd like living beside the water. You seemed like you belonged to the forest, if anything. You looked like the man I loved, the skinnier, miserable version of you, and I thought about putting myself into the beads of your sweat, or spilling myself into your mouth to be swallowed. But I was split into raindrops and you couldn't see me very well, so you also couldn't tell what was rain and what wasn't.

We'd been lovers for years by then, and I had a mind full of memories, you picking me up and carrying me through the house, me swimming up to you through your wineglass. I had memories of falling backward onto your bed, your mouth on my cunt, your hands opening me until I screamed. I had memories of fucking you in that shower, and of getting down on my knees to take your cock in my mouth, memories of you coming on my face. Whenever I looked at you, I could see that written all around you, a history of heaven, but now you wouldn't fuck me. Instead we just held each other in bed, trying not to fall apart. Something was wrong with you, and I couldn't fix it, so I walked naked through your house, and sometimes dissolved onto the floor, waiting for you to slip. If you were going to die, if you'd decided that was what was happening, I wanted to be the ice you cracked your skull on. At least then I'd be there. I froze myself into a river on the floor of your bedroom, and you looked down at me sadly, and skated barefoot, refusing to cut me.

"What would it be like," you'd said the day before, "if I was gone?"

"It would be like shit," I told you.

"I'm not going down to End Beach," I said. I'd never been. I didn't like the look of it. So you went there alone.

That was a year ago. Now I'm standing in your kitchen, looking down the garbage disposal, wondering if it could take me. It can take teabags. That's why you bought it. I'm looking at fish tanks all over town. I'm looking at soup bowls. I'm looking at birdbaths and wineglasses. I want a crow to put the pebbles into my pitcher and spill me, but you were my crow, and now I feel like I'm just an inch of water stuck at the bottom of a vessel.

Upstairs the foxes yip a little bit and downstairs the bats rustle. In here, I'm naked on the linoleum, drinking tea so hot and strong it hurts, and trying to let you go wherever you went. I want to take

off for another continent, or maybe I don't. Maybe I want a dead sea, and me salted beneath its surface. Maybe I want to go to Russia and sell myself for caviar. I could cork myself up in a bottle and appear at toasts, or stretch myself at the bottom of a swimming pool and wait for businessmen to have heart attacks above me. I could take myself off into a current and press myself to the bottom of an iceberg, all the parts beneath the surface, mapping them with my fingers, swimming below the frozen blue. I could wait for leaves to fall on me in the bottom of a mountain creek, or stay here, in your kitchen, with the water running until it overflows the sink and fills the room.

In your bed, I wrap myself three times in the comforter, and look out the window, seeing the view, and maybe the monster too, a long black ridge in the surf just off End Beach. You never cared. You'd dive out there, and kayak, and float on your back with sunglasses on as I watched through binoculars. Eventually I got used to it. I'd let you out the door, and you'd go swimming.

"I'm from here," you told me back then. "I grew up here. It's not a big deal. I don't know what you're so scared of. You don't need to be scared. You love the water."

Love was not the word for me and water. Love is not what it is, and now, even less. The bracelets are heavy on my wrists, and the loops for the chains are uncomfortable. They're not just loops. They're shaped like fish.

I was scared of that beach. I thought about something rushing up beneath me. When I think about the monster out there, it's a tremendous sort of stingray and can flatten itself to the ocean floor like a carpet. I think about what might walk on a carpet like that. Usually, that would be me. On any other beach in the world, I'd be finding pearl divers, or coral thieves. I'd be down with the sharks. Not here.

Last July, a girl came to the house, up from the festival. She was drugged out and giddy, but happy, wearing an outfit made of nets and seagull feathers. She smelled like a bonfire. Her hair was to her knees, and tangled, but beautiful anyway, bright gold, thick and shiny, knotted with shells.

"Can I have a glass of water?" she asked me, and I let her in.

"I wouldn't ask, but I'm sick of Gatorade," she said. "Everyone's worried about dehydration down there, and they should be, too. But it's amazing. You know. You have to do it. There's no saying no

to a festival like this. I've been coming since I was little."

"What did you sacrifice?" I asked her, and she looked at me and laughed. She was maybe eighteen. Not old enough to be down there at all.

"Oh, I gave up the barrettes my mom gave me before she was swept out," she said. "My mom won the festival ten years ago, did I say that? And then I took someone's dad's suicide note from him and burned it in the fire. It was a good trade. It's a beautiful thing, don't you think?"

"I don't know," I said. "There's nothing I want to sacrifice. I feel like I did it all already."

She tangled her hair around her hand in a way that meant something, and then she looked up at me again. "But you know what's out there, right?"

"No," I said. "What's in all oceans. I know what's in this one. Fish and maybe some whales."

"More than that," she said, and her face was so bright she glowed. Maybe she was on ecstasy. I don't know what the drugs are these days. It used to be that people took all kinds of things distilled from barley and mold, snake venom and poisonous flowers. I'd meet them in the Roman baths and in the trickles of water slipping down stone walls, find them in their steaming raptures and whisper them onto my tongue. No one heard them screaming down there, or if they did, it was part of the ritual. Everyone knew back then that some people had to die to pay for the miracles. Now people think miracles are free.

"It's not just the ocean. It's not just drowning. You get swept away if you win. I don't have enough to lose yet, but I will eventually," she told me. "I'll just keep coming back until I do. I'll fall in love with someone, and maybe I'll have a baby. That might be enough."

"You know that festival gets bigger every year. They're eroding the coastline. They'll probably shut it down. There've been complaints."

I'm the one who complained. I hate the noise and the mess. I hate that there's a festival down there at all.

"I'm going to win. I'm going to be the one who gets to be swept out to sea," she said, and kissed me on the mouth, her lips soft and heavy, her tongue against my teeth, her hands suddenly on my ribcage and her breasts pressed against mine. This was not what I

was expecting. Then she was gone, running back down the cliff stairs, her fishnet top rattling with barnacles for quite a way, her cut-offs barely covering her.

I looked over her head to see if I could see the monster, but I couldn't. I could only hear the cheering later in the evening when she had herself shorn, all those golden curls hung like a fleece from the cliff face. I walked out to the rock and looked down, and there she was, her slender body draped in white, everyone down there drinking wine and singing to whatever god they thought was in charge. I could see that she had tattoos, and all of them of sea monsters, dark ink like woodcuts, her body a habitat. One of the boys down below crowned her naked scalp with flowers, and I sat on the rock until it was full dark.

I won't lie. I thought about walking down those stairs then, down to the sands of End Beach. I could see the ocean lapping at the shore like a cat's tongue at a dish. I could see the blood from the day's sacrifices running into its mouth.

Someone that day had given up a hand, and learned to paint with the other. Someone else had written an apology for everything in the sand and let people fuck on it. Another person had built a tower of unsold canvases, and that was the bonfire that night, a pile of portraits of her lovers. I heard a smaller barter carrying up from the beach, two boys bargaining for dinner, one boy offering another his only memory of his grandmother singing, in exchange for a cheese sandwich.

I stayed up on the top of the cliff instead. After a while, I went back into your house and tried to forget you. If I was giving you up, if the memory of you was my sacrifice, I'm not sure how much of me would be left on the other side. You flooded through me and mixed with my blood, and I don't know what of me is mine and what is yours.

Now it's winter, and End Beach is empty. No one's trying to sell their precious things down there anymore. I turn the bracelets on my wrists, and turn them again. Wherever you are, I wonder if you remember the first night we spent together, and if you knew that I almost let myself kill you. You were bandaging my wounds, and I was sitting on the top of your toilet, looking at you. I could see the tears in your eyes, and I almost ran into them, trying to save myself from falling in love with a human again. I could have poured out of you, torrented, flooded you from the inside out until you drowned

in a teacup's worth of salt water.

But I didn't want to kill you. It'd been four hundred years since I'd stood in a courtroom, dripping, and let a town convict my lover of loving me.

"What was I to do," he said, pleading. "She came up out of the stream, naked and wet, and she said *be with me.* What would you do, Sven Andersson? And you?"

"Not what you did, Peder Jönsson," said Sven Andersson, but he was staring at me, salivating. Finally they decided on a hanging, and my love was strung up from a gallows with me unable to do anything about it. I had no sway over wood, no sway over rope. I threw myself down a well and stayed at the bottom, eating insects, holding my breath, waiting for another century to come and comfort me.

I was frightened of you. You'd torn me from my tank. But I let you bandage me, where I was bleeding, and when you told me you didn't have to know everything, I told you I did. When you said you had no secrets, I laughed at you. When you said you were simple, I laughed some more.

"No one simple would have seen me," I said.

But you didn't tell me everything.

I make a decision at last. I've already lost you, and you're the best thing I ever lost. It's been long enough that I've read all your books and touched all your pictures. I've drunk the last of the tea you left.

"It's part of the thing," you said, and so I go to your basement and get the chains. There aren't any special costumes, I don't think, or at least you never said there were. Just the bracelets. I thread the chains through the loops on the rock, and then through the fish on my wrists. I stretch on my back, looking up at snow falling, and then I lock the locks.

"It's silly," you said. *"Come down to End Beach with me,"* you said, but I didn't. Maybe if I had I could have kept whatever happened from happening. You got swept away, or swept yourself away. You let the ocean take you. I don't think you're riding a bus somewhere, or under London on the tube. I don't think you've flown across the ocean and are hiding from me in New York City. I think you're gone.

I chain myself to the rock hanging over the shore, and perch there until I'm covered in ice. I hold my breath, waiting for another

season to come, spring or the middle of summer, with light like blood and every green plant drinking girls like me up from the ground. I think about everyone I ever tugged down through a river, every diver I ever touched gently underwater, until they couldn't do anything but drown for me.

Through the ice on my eyelashes, I can see the ocean surging, the dark spinning and stirring, an abyss below the surface of the world.

At dawn, I watch the monster rise up out of the sea, its body a blackness the size of a lake. It's too large to see it all at once, and so I don't. Ink spilled in a glass of water, shifting and spreading, black bleeding into blue, edgeless. I watch the monster surge up over the sand and look at me, eyes gleaming, claws on the cliff face.

I am not afraid of monsters. I've never been afraid of monsters. I'm afraid of love. Love is offering your body up to some god other than the one you were taught to worship.

I look into the monster's eyes. It's no monster I know, no monster in a category I've seen before. There are the old monsters that tore ships from the ocean, the ones that leapt from caves, the ones that waited underground for heroes. There are the monsters that trampled mountain ranges, the ones that ate all the cattle, and then all the children. There are the monsters of the air, the ones that fly, the ones that sing songs so beautiful every city sleeps. This is a monster I've never met, a monster of the end.

I look at it and see not just sadness, but fury.

"Are you the one who does the sweeping out to sea?" I shout. "Are you the one who takes the sacrifices? Did you take him away? I want him back."

"He's not everything," said your neighbor. "I should know. He eats women. You don't know what I've seen. I've lived opposite him for years. It's not your fault you fell for him. I fell for him too."

But the monster just looks at me, eyes shining, and I want to turn to water and become its tears. Love is what you see coming and don't run from. Love is the swift rising darkness darker than the dark. Love is the creature you covet, the wound you want.

The monster looks at me and says nothing, and of course, I know you. I'd know you anywhere.

I move my fingers, trying to get between you and your scales, and I get one nail under your skin. My heart is still made of hammers. I drive it in deeper, puncturing you until I smell your blood.

You open your jaws and pluck me from the rock, the chains that hold me there breaking. Down below us, the coastline erodes and End Beach itself is swept out to sea.

I met you, love of mine, at the end of centuries spent alone. My body has been every decorative lily pool in Japan, and every waterfall in Africa. My body's been the Amazon, full of snakes, thigh-deep wading for explorers, and the Mississippi and her floodplains, spilling out across miles, looping and twisting to surprise the houses. My body was the last moments of the Aral Sea, the final drops drunk by a camel and carried away. When you found me in that fish tank, I was too lonely to travel.

So I dissolve onto your tongue. I rush through your tears and pour myself beneath your skin. Water will always find its level.

In the sea off End Beach, we swim out, our flesh one thing and then two again, you naked and me naked too. Maybe every love affair is the sacrifice that saves the city. Behind us, I see buildings not falling.

The rocks are black and sharp, and the teeth of dead monsters are all around us. Some of them starved to death, and others were killed by heroes. Some of them swallowed ships in starvation. Some of them, maybe, got harpooned by their lovers. You taste like tea, like salt, like ice.

"Do you eat all the artists?" I ask you, "Is that festival for you?" and you look at me and tell me you have to have some secrets.

"Do you drink all the drowned?" you ask me, and I tell you I have to have some secrets too.

No one knows the end of this. Not me. I don't know if I'll end up in a gutter, or in a teacup again, in a champagne glass, in an ice cube in someone's freezer, trying to wait for forever to pass.

"This is simple," I say.

"Nothing's simple," you tell me.

A long time ago, I used to know a fisherman. We met when I was his fish, and he called me up out of the water to grant him wishes. I told him nothing you wish for is what you think it's going to be, that even if you wish for riches, you'll end up buried in coins, suffocating on metal. He asked for love, and I told him that love will kill you.

"I don't mind dying," he said.

So I gave him love. Later, I rolled his body in a sail and then into the ocean, with rocks at his feet. I watched him drop through the

water, and at the bottom, I watched him eaten by the little creatures down there. When all his bones were bare, I made him into a house, and lived inside him for a while. His love gave me shelter beneath the waves, and my love gave him the last thing he wanted. I am not sorry.

I turn my head to look at you, and you're all around me, this giant span of fins and tail, teeth and eyes.

"Swim," I say, and I become the ocean.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Dahvana Headley is the author of the upcoming young adult sky ship fantasy *Magonia,* from HarperCollins, the novel *Queen of Kings,* the internationally bestselling memoir *The Year of Yes,* and *The End of the Sentence,* a novella co-written with Kat Howard, from Subterranean. With Neil Gaiman, she's *The New York Times*-bestselling co-editor of the anthology *Unnatural Creatures.* Her short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula and Shirley Jackson awards, and has recently appeared at *Uncanny Magazine, Tor.com, Lightspeed, Nightmare, Clarkesworld, Shimmer, Apex, Subterranean Online, The Lowest Heaven, The Book of the Dead,* and many more. It's anthologized in *Glitter & Mayhem,* Rich Horton's *The Year's Best Fantasy & Science Fiction 2012 & 2013,* Paula Guran's 2013 *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror,* and Laird Barron's *The Year's Best Weird Fiction.*

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

Cerile and the Journeyer

Adam-Troy Castro

The journeyer was still a young man when he embarked on his search for the all-powerful witch Cerile.

He was bent and gray-haired a lifetime later when he found a map to her home in the tomb of the forgotten kings.

The map directed him halfway across the world, over the Souleater mountains, through the Curtains of Night, past the scars of the Eternal War, and across a great grassy plain, to the outskirts of Cerile's Desert.

The desert was an ocean of luminescent white sand, which even in the dead of night still radiated the killing heat it swallowed during the day. He knew at once that it could broil the blood in his veins before he traveled even half the distance to the horizon. It even warned him: "Turn back, journeyer. I am as sharp as broken glass, and as hot as open flame. I am filled with soft shifting places that can open up and swallow you without warning. I can drive you mad and leave you to wander in circles until your strength sinks into the earth. And when you die of thirst, as you surely shall if you attempt to pass, I can ride the winds to flay the skin from your burnt and blistered bones."

He proceeded across the dunes, stumbling as his feet sank ankle-deep into the sand, gasping as the furnace heat turned his breath to a dry rasp, but hesitating not at all, merely continuing his march toward the destiny that could mean either death or Cerile.

When the desert saw it couldn't stop him, the ground burst open in a million places, pierced by a great forest that, with the speed known only by miracles, shot up to scrape the sky. The trees were all hundreds of arm-lengths across, the spaces between them so narrow that even an uncommonly thin man would have had to hold his breath to pass. It was a maze that could exhaust him utterly before he traveled even halfway to the horizon. It even warned him: "Turn back, journeyer. I am as dark as the night itself, and as threatening as your worst dreams. I am rich with thorns sharp

enough to rip the skin from your arms. And if you die lost and alone, as you surely shall if you attempt to pass, I can dig roots into your flesh and grow more trees on your bones."

He entered the woods anyway, crying out as thorns drew blood from his arms and legs, gasping as the trees drew close and threatened to imprison him, but hesitating not at all: merely continuing to march west, toward the destiny that could mean either death or Cerile.

When the forest saw that it couldn't stop him, then the trees all around him merely withered away, and the ground ahead of him rose up, like a thing on hinges, to form a right angle with the ground at his feet. The resulting wall stretched from one horizon to the other, rising straight up into the sky to disappear ominously in the clouds. He knew at once that he did not have the skill or the strength to climb even halfway to the unseen summit. It even warned him: "Turn back, journeyer. I am as smooth as glass and as treacherous as an enemy. I am poor with handholds and impossible to climb. And if you fall, as you surely will if you attempt to pass, then the ground where I stand will be the resting place of your shattered corpse."

He proceeded to climb anyway; moaning as his arms and legs turned to lead from exhaustion, gasping as the temperature around him turned chilly and then frigid, but hesitating not at all: merely continuing to climb upward, toward the destiny that could mean either death or Cerile.

When the cliff saw that it couldn't stop him, then warm winds came and gently lifted him into the sky, over the top of the wall, and down into a lush green valley on the other side, where a frail, white-haired old woman sat beside a still and mirrored pond.

The winds deposited him on his feet on the opposite side of the pond, allowing him to see himself in the water: how he was bent, and stooped, and white-haired, and old, with skin the texture of leather, and eyes that had suffered too much for too long.

He looked away from his reflection, and faced the crone across the water. "You are Cerile?"

"I am," she croaked, in a voice ancient and filled with dust.

"I have heard of you," he said, with the last of his battered strength. "How you have mastered all the secrets of the heavens and the earth, and can make the world itself do your bidding. How you've hidden yourself in this place at the edge of the world, and

sworn to grant the fondest wish of any soul clever and brave enough to find you. I have spent my entire life journeying here, Cerile, just to ask this of you. I wish — ”

The old woman shushed him, softly but emphatically, and painfully pulled herself to her feet; her bent back forcing her to face the ground as she spoke to him again. “Never mind your wish. Meet me in the water, journeyer.”

And with that she doffed her clothes and lowered her withered, emaciated frame into the water, disturbing its mirrored surface not at all. By the time she was knee-deep, her white hair darkened, turning raven black; by the time she was hip-deep, the wrinkles in her face had smoothed out, becoming perfect, unblemished skin; by the time she was shoulder-deep, her rheumy, unfocused eyes had unclouded, revealing a shade of green as brilliant and as beautiful as the most precious emerald.

By then, of course, the journeyer had also descended naked into the magical pond, to feel the weight of years lifted from his flesh; to feel his weathered skin smooth out, growing strong and supple again; to feel his spine grow straight and his eyes grow clear and his shoulders grow broad, as they had been before he started his quest, more years ago than he could count.

When they met, at the deepest part of the pond, she surprised him with an embrace.

“I am Cerile,” she said. “I have been awaiting your arrival for longer than you can possibly know.”

He couldn’t speak. He knew only that she was right, that he had known her for an age far beyond the limited reach of his memory, that they had loved each other once, and would now love each other again.

They kissed, and she led him from the water, to a small cottage that had not been standing on the spot a heartbeat before. There were fine clothes waiting for him, to replace those torn to rags by his long journey. There was a feast, too, to fill the yawning void in his belly. There were other wonders, too, things that could only exist in the home of a miracle-worker like Cerile: things he had not the wit to name, that glittered and whirred in odd corners, spinning soft music unlike any he had ever heard. He would have been dazzled by them had Cerile not also been there, to dazzle him even more.

But still, something gnawed at him.

It wasn't the wish, which seemed such a trivial little thing, now, a trifle not even worth mentioning, because Cerile in her love gave him everything any man could possibly want . . . and yet, yes, damn him, it was the wish, the miracle he'd waited his entire life to see, and had marched across kingdoms to find.

It had something to do with all those oceans he'd crossed, all those monsters he'd fought, all the winters he'd endured.

It was pride.

He stayed with her for a year and a day, in that little valley where the days themselves seemed written for them, where the gardens changed colors daily to fit their moods, and the stars danced whimsical little jigs to accompany the musical way she laughed at night. Even troubled as he was, he knew a happiness that he hadn't known for a long time, maybe not ever, certainly not for as far back as his limited memory recorded: not since sometime before the day, a lifetime before, when he'd found himself a stranger in a small fishing village, wholly unable to remember who he was or how he'd come to that place.

Then, late one night, at the end of their year together, he awoke tormented by the strange restlessness in his heart, and rose from their bed to walk alone by the edge of her private fountain of youth. The water had always reflected the stars, every other night he'd looked upon it; it had always seemed to contain an entirely self-contained universe, as filled with endless possibility as the one where he and Cerile lived and walked and breathed. But tonight, though there were plenty of stars in the sky, none were reflected on the pond surface. The water showed only a dark, inky blackness that reflected not possibility but the cold finality of a prison.

Cerile's beautiful voice rang out from somewhere in the darkness that suddenly surrounded him. "What is wrong, my love?"

"I was thinking," he said, without turning to face her. "That I journeyed all this distance and spent all this time here and never got around to asking you to grant my Wish."

"Is there any point?" she asked — and for the first time since he arrived, he heard in a voice an unsettling note of despair. "What could you possibly wish for that would be of any value to you here? Health? Strength? Eternal youth and beauty? You already have that, here. Love? Happiness? I've given you those, too. Riches? Power? Stay here and you can have as much of either as any man could possibly want."

"I know," he said. "They were all things I once thought I'd wish for when I found you. You gave them to me without waiting for me to wish for them. But my Wish is still hanging over my head, demanding to be used."

"You don't have to listen to it."

"I do. It's the only thing I own that I earned myself, that I can truly say you didn't give me. And if I don't use it, then everything I've done means nothing."

"Why don't you just wish that you can be content to always stay here with me, and love me forever, as I'll love you forever?"

He turned and faced her, seeing her forlorn and lost by the door of their cottage, wanting her more than everything he'd ever wanted before, feeling his own heart break at the knowledge that he'd caused the sorrow welling in her eyes. And for the first time he understood that they'd endured this moment hundreds or even thousands of times before, for as long as the sun had been a fire in the sky.

He said, "I'm sorry. I can't wish for that. I wish for the one thing I lost when I came here. A purpose. Something to struggle for. A reason to deserve everything you give me, whenever I manage to find my way back."

She granted his Wish, then fell to her knees and sobbed: not the tears of an omnipotent creature who controlled the earth and the stars, and could have had everything she ever wanted, but the tears of a lonely little girl who couldn't.

When she rose again, she approached the waters of eternal youth, and sat down beside them, knowing that she wouldn't feel their touch again until the inevitable day, still a lifetime away, when he would, all too briefly, return to her.

Someday, she swore, she'd make him so happy that he'd never Wish to leave.

Until then —

The journeyer was still a young man when he embarked on his search for the all-powerful witch Cerile.

He was bent and gray-haired a lifetime later when he found a map to her home in the tomb of the forgotten kings . . .

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam-Troy Castro is currently best known for his middle-grade series about the macabre adventures of a very strange, very courageous young boy named Gustav Gloom. The most recent volume, *Gustav Gloom And The Four Terrors,* was released by Grosset and Dunlap in November of 2013. Adam-Troy's short fiction has been nominated for two Hugos, three Stokers, and eight Nebulas. His novel *Emissaries From The Dead* won the Philip K. Dick award. Adam lives in Boynton Beach, FL, with his wife Judi and a collection of insane cats.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

Things You Can Buy for a Penny

Will Kaufman

"Don't go down to the well," said Theo to his son. So, of course, Tim went to the well. He was thirteen, and his father told him not to. There was no magic to it.

To get to the well — and not the well in the center of the village, because everyone knows where that well is, and no one has any stories about it except for whose grandfather dug it and how soon it's going to go dry — you've got to go around behind the butcher's, to the bottom of the muddy slope at the edge of the wood that the butcher says he doesn't throw his offal down. Everybody knows the butcher throws offal down the slope so the wet gentleman will eat that instead of crawling up to eat the butcher's daughter.

At the bottom of the slope, look for the bones of the burnt cottage in among the willows, then look for the moon. You know this only works at night, don't you? The wet gentleman won't come out during the day. Walk towards the point halfway between the moon and the cottage, and eventually you'll come to the well.

Tim sneaked from his father's house with a penny in his hand and his dog at his side, a dog that he loved because it would never lie to him or trick him, that he would play with even when the other children invited him to join their games, because when he told the other children to follow him, or wait for him, they would laugh and run away, but not his dog. When his father tucked him in to bed, it was his dog he asked for a last kiss goodnight, its cold nose snuffling at his cheek, because his dog never told him what to do, or sent him to bed without his dinner for not minding, because what do dogs know? Maybe if Tim had been a king or a god he could have loved the other children, or his father.

What happened to Tim when he went to the well? You must know how the story ends — or rather, that it never ends. Surely you've heard about the others who went to the well, like Ma Tathers.

When Ma Tathers went to the well, she got just what she paid

for. She heard about the well because of what happened to Miser Horton, so she knew the wet gentleman lived there and would grant wishes if he were paid a penny. Miser Horton went because he knew the story of Little Susanne, and both of them got just what they paid for, too.

The story says Ma Tathers was so old when she walked the path between the moon and the burned up cottage that her dugs dragged in the dirt. That's not a kind way to describe a poor old woman, but stories are seldom kind, especially to a poor old woman in a tattered housecoat, which was her only coat, which she wore thinner and thinner as she sat day after day patching up other people's clothes for pennies. Her eyes were milky, and she had to bring the cloth and the needle right up to her mottled nose to see what she was doing. Her grandsons, who she was raising because their parents had died, would say to her, "Don't stick that needle so close to your eye, grandma. You'll poke it one day, and it'll fall right out."

"That's no trouble," Ma Tathers would say. "I always got the other one." What she meant was, "If my eye were worth a few pennies, I'd sell it right from my head."

Even though Ma Tathers had heard the stories, the same stories you've heard, and knew better than to think she could trust the wet gentleman, she did not know what else she could do. She would never take charity, even when it was offered, as though some bone in her body, maybe her fourth rib or her left shin, was so stubborn or proud it made her shift her ponderous breast, lift her swollen leg, and turn away from any helping hand. Without charity, and with her eyes going, and her grandsons getting bigger and needing more to eat every day, Ma Tathers didn't see where she could afford to buy what she needed but from the wet gentleman.

The day she decided she would go to the well, Ma Tathers worked as fast as she could, the needle fleet in her crooked fingers. She stitched up every shirt and every pair of pants she could coax from the villagers, but that night she had fewer pennies than she'd earned the day before, just four dull coins sitting on the rough wood of her bare table. Spending one that night would mean three pennies for the next day's meals, and while the boys might not complain, their stomachs would grumble mightily. Of course, their stomachs would never grumble again once Ma Tathers got what she paid for at the well.

So she walked the moonlit path, and she dropped her penny down the dark, stone mouth of the crumbling well. Instead of the ringing of a coin hitting stone, or the plop of metal falling into swampy muck, Ma Tathers heard the squelch of wet silk and the pattering of dripping water. The wet gentleman emerged from the well, top hat first, eyes hidden, shadowed from the moonlight by the flat brim. His face was long, home to a wide mouth that turned down at the corners. His suit was fine silk, his shoes shined even in the night, and he leaned on an ivory cane. All his raiment was soaked through, and water ran from all the creases, and a puddle formed at his feet. He was very tall, very thin, and Ma Tathers had not really expected him to exist.

The wet gentleman spoke with a voice deep and cold as his well. He said, "How does this night find you, madam?"

"I am tired," said Ma Tathers, who always answered plainly.

The wet gentleman said, *"You* are tired? I have been down this well since the first brick of your village was laid, soaking in cold water, waiting for the nights someone drops a penny on my head so I can crawl out and grant them a wish. But I forget myself, a gentleman never complains. Do tell me more about your troubles, miss."

"Is it true?" asked Ma Tathers. "What they say about Miser Horton, and about Little Susanne?"

The top hat bowed as the wet gentleman looked Ma Tathers up and down. "Surely you didn't spend what must be one of your few pennies to hear a story?"

"No," said Ma Tathers. "I came because my grandsons are hungry, and I will not be able to feed them for much longer."

"So you wish to be young again," said the wet gentleman, and he took her hand. Music came out of the well, pipes and strings.

"No," said Ma Tathers, but the wet gentleman spun her, and ice-cold water ran down her arm, and her feet felt light, and her joints did not ache, and her back was straight, and she knew the steps to the dance he led her on.

"For selfless reasons," he said. "So you might live long enough to care for them until they can care for themselves."

"No," said Ma Tathers, but her hips swayed, and did not pop or creak.

"How much easier would it be to raise two young men if you no longer hurt just from standing? If you could wash a pan and not feel

like lying down and sleeping for a week, after?"

"No," said Ma Tathers, and she broke his grip. Her body sagged as the weight of years fell upon it again and pain settled back in her bones. "I know your tricks and I know your bargains, so whatever the price for my wish, it must be laid on me and not on my boys."

Even though he had been out of the well for some minutes, and even though he had spun with Ma Tathers, the water dripping from the gentleman's clothes had not slowed. The wet gentleman said, "Tell me, Joanna Susanne Tathers. Tell me your wish."

"Make sure my grandsons are fed. They can figure out the rest. I've taught Theo to sew, and the house is mine, and theirs when I am dead, the sole property of my family. Make sure they have enough to eat until they are able to earn food for themselves."

"And what price do you think I will ask? Have you not paid me my penny?"

"You will weave spells full of deceit. You will make something good into something evil by your trickery. Instead, I say you can take anything of my body. A meal for a meal. I have heard of your appetites, how the butcher leaves you offal so you will not eat his daughter."

"Some stories are just stories," said the wet gentleman. "But very well, I will feed your grandchildren, and I will not ask any payment of them for those meals." He held out his hand, "Do we have a deal?"

She took his hand, and shook it firmly, and then she quailed, and began to shiver. "What," she said, "what will you do to me?"

The corners of the wet gentleman's mouth twitched upward.

When Ma Tathers wandered back out of the woods in the morning she could not recall the village, or her house, or her grandsons, or even her own name. The wet gentleman ate all those memories.

Her grandchildren brought her home and asked her if she felt ill, but when she opened her mouth all that came out were stories about the wet gentleman who lived in the well. The boys fretted and cried, uncertain and afraid, and hungry from only having three pennies worth of food that day. But then a knock came at the door, and when they opened it they found a basket full of brown bread and hard cheese and cured sausage and even two apples. With a meal in them, and with a few morsels coaxed down their grandmother's throat, the future seemed ever so slightly less

frightening.

The boys went on, as people do, and ate their meals, and cared for their grandmother, who did nothing but tell stories about the wet gentleman until she died.

One of the stories she told was the story of Miser Horton, a man so mean with his pocketbook that when he went down to the well, he stole the penny to pay the wet gentleman from the shoe of a boy who had left it behind to climb trees with his friends. Miser Horton strode through the woods holding up the hem of his cape so it would not get dirty and need to be cleaned, or snag and tear and need to be mended. The cape was velvet, and very old, taken as partial payment for goods Miser Horton had sold decades earlier. He would proudly tell you the story of that deal if you asked, and maybe even let you touch the cape in question.

Miser Horton knew Little Susanne's story, but he, like all the rest who have heard stories and have followed the moonlight path with pennies in their hands, did not expect the wet gentleman to climb out of the well. Miser Horton recovered quickly from his shock, thanks in part to his immediate disdain for the wet gentleman's lack of care with his clothes. Did the man not know what water did to silk?

"How does this night find you, sir?" asked the wet gentleman.

"Jealous," said Miser Horton, getting directly to his business.

"You are jealous?" said the wet gentleman. "I have been down this well since the oldest tree in these woods was just a sapling, in the cold and wet and dark while above me people live in warmth and dry comfort, and I only get to visit when someone drops a penny on my head. But I forget myself, a gentleman never complains. Tell me more about your troubles."

"My wife has made me a cuckold," said Miser Horton. "Me. Even though I gave her a house and an allowance and children, she has been sneaking out of my bed when she thinks I am asleep."

"So you would like to be handsome," said the wet gentleman, and he reached out to place a hand on Miser Horton's shoulder. Horton stood taller, his stomach receding while his chest and arms strained the seams of his shirt. His scalp itched, and thick locks of hair drooped down over his brow. From the well came the voices of women, calling to him, sighing his name.

"No," said Miser Horton.

"To win back your wife," said the wet gentleman, "or make her

jealous when all the other girls throw themselves at your feet and beg to take her place in your bed."

Miser Horton said, "No," and knocked the wet gentleman's hand from his shoulder. He sagged, his chest and arms draining into his belly, which expanded until his belt cut into it, and his scalp crawled as the hair slid back under the shiny skin. Miser Horton brushed at his cape, hoping the water would not stain the velvet. He said, "What good is being handsome? No one pays to look upon a pretty face."

"Yet you have paid to look upon mine," said the wet gentleman. "Let me earn your penny. Tell me your wish."

"Punish whoever stole my wife from my bed," said Miser Horton. "Make him poor, make his family poor. Make any children he may have poor for the rest of their lives, and their children, too, with nothing to their family's name but the meanest sort of shanty for a home until the end of his bloodline or the day of reckoning, whichever comes first."

"Very well," said the wet gentleman, and he offered his hand.

Miser Horton regarded it suspiciously. "This is no small service you offer me. What price must I pay?"

"You have paid me my penny," said the wet gentleman. "If I cannot deliver, you will have only lost the penny you already threw down a well, and you may find some other way to punish the man responsible for your wife's infidelity."

Miser Horton took the wet gentleman's hand, and then felt a chill on his shoulders. He reached up to pull his cape close, only to discover it was gone, and his shirt had turned from fine cotton to rough wool.

"What have you done?" he asked, and looked into the wet gentleman's face, where he saw the corners of that wide mouth flick upwards.

"Do you not see, Horton Tathers?" said the wet gentleman. *"You* are responsible for your wife's infidelity, you with your petty jealousy and greedy character. Now go home to your shanty and tell your children the cost of doing business with the wet gentleman in the well."

Horton did just that, and one of the stories he told his children about the price you must pay the wet gentleman for a wish was the story of Little Susanne. Little Susanne lived in a cottage in the woods near the village with her mommy and daddy and her cat,

Tugs. She loved Tugs very much. When Mommy and Daddy filled the cottage in the woods with terrible shouting, Little Susanne would pick up Tugs and take him outside and lean against a willow and hold him and pet him until he purred, then press her ear against his chest so all she heard was his warm, soft rattle and not the terrible shouting.

One day her daddy threw a chair at her mommy and it missed and hit Tugs instead, and Tugs yowled, and scrambled about with his front legs, his hindquarters dragging on the floor. Daddy grabbed Tugs by the neck and took him outside, and when he came back he didn't have Tugs with him. Little Susanne asked where Tugs had gone, and Daddy said he'd tried to help Tugs but Tugs had run off into the woods.

After crying for a week, Little Susanne decided to go to the wishing well. Maybe she knew about the well from even older stories, or maybe from exploring the woods, from taking children's paths over the ground and through imagination. Maybe you would know about the well too, even if you had never been told.

Little Susanne took a penny from her daddy's coin purse while he was snoring, and tiptoed through the door, careful not to let it creak or slam, and walked down to the well. She threw the coin in, and almost screamed when the wet gentleman's top hat poked out over the edge, followed by his shadowed eyes and wide, downturned mouth.

The wet gentleman bowed to her and said, "How does this night find you, miss?"

"Scared," said Little Susanne, being truthful. "And lonely. And sad."

"I understand," said the wet gentleman. "I have been down this well since your holy books were only dreams and firelight tales. That is a long time to be lonely, and sad, and scared."

"You're very wet," said Little Susanne. "Would you like me to bring you some clothes? My daddy has three shirts, and he might not miss one."

"That is very kind of you," said the wet gentleman, "but it would only get wet again, because I must go back down the well once I grant your wish."

"Oh," said Little Susanne. "If I don't make a wish, can you stay up here?"

"That is not the way the story goes, Susanne Joanna Smyth," said

the wet gentleman. “I must tell you that a gentleman never complains, and you must tell me your wish.”

Little Susanne tucked a toe into the dirt and mumbled something under her breath.

“You are scared, I understand that,” said the wet gentleman. “Would you like to be grownup, so you can be brave and sure like your mommy and daddy?” He knelt down in front of her and took her hand in his and she grew, and her hips and breasts swelled, and she stood looking down at the wet gentleman, kneeling and holding her hand.

“No,” she said.

“You can leave your parent’s home and find a man to marry and live with him and never be lonely or scared again.”

Little Susanne felt something else. She felt a stirring inside of her that was hot and safe and terrifying and awesome and hopeful and fearful all at the same time. From the well came the sound of a babe, crying for its mother. “No,” she said, and she pulled her hand free. She shrank back into childhood until her eyes were level with the kneeling gentleman, water dripping from his hat and from his jacket, and the corners of his mouth twitched downward even further.

“I want Tugs back,” she said. “I want him to purr to me and keep me company until I die. And . . .”

“Yes?” said the wet gentleman.

“And I want Mommy and Daddy to stop fighting.”

“Two wishes?” said the wet gentleman, standing so that he towered over Little Susanne. “Have you brought two pennies?”

“No,” said Little Susanne. “Do I have to choose?”

The wet gentleman tilted his head back and considered the stars through the leaves of the trees. “You do not have to choose,” he said at last. “One wish will be yours, and one will be mine. You shall have your cat, and your parents will fight no more.”

“Thank you,” said Little Susanne, and she hugged the wet gentleman round his legs, which were stick thin and hard as rocks inside his suit, and she got all wet up the front of her nightclothes.

“Thank *you,”* said the wet gentleman, “for the penny. Now go home.”

As she walked home, Little Susanne saw a flickering orange glow through the trees. She heard a roaring, a snapping and popping. She smelled wood smoke, and something else, something oily and black,

like when Mommy burned the bacon. Her house was on fire, and the heat singed her hair and dried her nightclothes. As she watched the house burn, Tugs stalked out from the woods and twined himself around her legs. She picked him up and held him to her ear, but even though she could feel the shudder of his purring, all she could hear was the fire.

That's how the villagers found Little Susanne when they ventured into the woods to investigate the fire. A family took her in, and she grew up in the village, always with her ageless cat at her feet or in her arms, and she married a good man with kind hands and a sharp mind, and one day she felt the stirring inside of her, and remembered looking down at the wet gentleman on his knee at her feet, and knew she was pregnant.

She had many children, and told them about the wet gentleman in the well, that he was very powerful, and very dangerous, and not to be trusted, except maybe sometimes, because after all, Tugs stayed with her and purred for her until she died, whereupon he climbed onto her still chest, turned around three times and curled up and died as well, and was buried with her.

Her family's fortunes rose over time, until Horton Tathers inherited the estate. Then the family was poor. But the family never stopped telling stories about the wet gentleman. Horton told them, and Joanna told them, and Theo listened to his grandmother but did not believe her, at least, not until the day Theo and his wife could no longer pretend she was anything but barren, and Theo went into the woods.

He took the path between the moon and the burned up cottage, and he threw a penny down the well, and the wet gentleman climbed out of the well and said, "How does this night find you, sir?"

The wet gentleman said, *"You* are troubled? I have been down this well since before you people learned to bake bricks."

He listened to Theo's troubles, and said, "So you would like a new wife, one who is young and fertile."

When Theo finally refused him, the wet gentleman said, "No? Very well, tell me your wish."

And the wet gentleman said, "I see you've paid attention to the stories. But you mustn't worry, all I really want is a penny now and then, and I know I'll have another soon enough, when your son comes to visit me."

Theo went home, frightened, doubtful, half-convinced it had been a dream, and in a few months his wife woke up ill and felt the stirring inside her. When their son was born they named him Timothy, and Theo told Tim the story of Little Susanne, and of Miser Horton, and Ma Tathers. Theo told his son these stories to warn him, so the boy would know better than to ever go down to the well.

Tim said, “Why did none of them simply wish for the wet gentleman’s power? You could do whatever you want, and you’d only ever owe yourself, and you wouldn’t ever do anything bad to yourself, or trick yourself.”

And Theo took hold of his son’s hands and said, “Don’t go down to the well.”

You already know what will happen next, and you can leave this story while Tim sneaks down past the butcher’s, his loyal dog at his side and a penny in his hand. You can leave while the wet gentleman waits in the place that exists beneath the mouth of the well, his face split by a grin. You can leave this story while the wet gentleman thinks about the many pennies he has gathered, pennies that are copper, pennies that are bronze, and some that are small shells or glittering stones, and how long, how long it has been since he went down to the well, a boy clutching something that, once upon a time, stood for a penny. He has grown so much since then, and worn the finery of so many different ages, and through all that time he has remained a gentleman. Soon, soon he will be a boy again; a boy who will very much hate taking baths.

And you, you who get exactly what you pay for, there may always be some wet gentleman waiting for you to throw your penny into the well, but you can leave any time you want. There is no magic to that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Kaufman’s work has appeared in *Unlikely Story, Unstuck, Daily Science Fiction,* and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency,* among other places. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Utah in 2011, and attended the Clarion Workshop in 2013. Currently, he is working on a collection of short stories and a novella. You can find Will online at kaufmanwrites.com, or in real life in Los Angeles, CA. If you’d like to follow Will, please do it on Twitter (@specwill), and not

in Los Angeles.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

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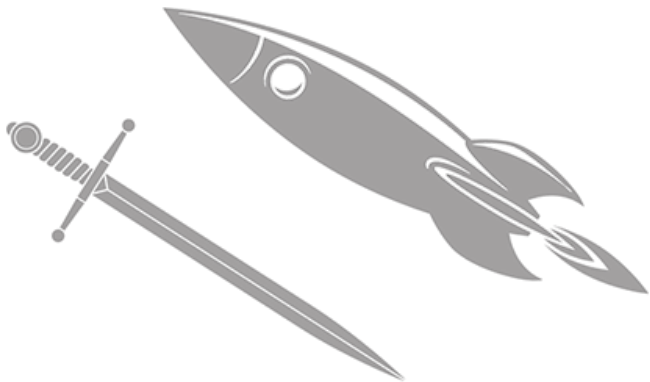

In the House of Aryaman, a Lonely Signal Burns

Elizabeth Bear

Police Sub-Inspector Ferron crouched over the object she assumed was the decedent, her hands sheathed in areactin, her elbows resting on uniformed knees. The body (presumed) lay in the middle of a jewel-toned rug like a flabby pink Klein bottle, its once-moist surfaces crusting in air. The rug was still fresh beneath it, fronds only a little dented by the weight and no sign of the browning that could indicate an improperly pheromone-treated object had been in contact with them for over twenty-four hours. Meandering brownish trails led out around the bodylike object; a good deal of the blood had already been assimilated by the rug, but enough remained that Ferron could pick out the outline of delicate paw-pads and the brush-marks of long hair.

Ferron was going to be late visiting her mother after work tonight.

She looked up at Senior Constable Indrapramit and said tiredly, "So this is the mortal remains of Dexter Coffin?"

Indrapramit put his chin on his thumbs, fingers interlaced thoughtfully before lips that had dried and cracked in the summer heat. "We won't know for sure until the DNA comes back." One knee-tall spit-shined boot wrapped in a sterile bootie prodded forward, failing to come within fifteen centimeters of the corpse. Was he jumpy? Or just being careful about contamination?

He said, "What do you make of that, boss?"

"Well." Ferron stood, straightening a kinked spine. "If that is Dexter Coffin, he picked an apt handle, didn't he?"

Coffin's luxurious private one-room flat had been sealed when patrol officers arrived, summoned on a welfare check after he did not respond to the flat's minder. When police had broken down the door — the emergency overrides had been locked out — they had found this. This pink tube. This enormous sausage. This meaty object like a child's toy "eel," a long squashed torus full of fluid.

If you had a hand big enough to pick it up, Ferron imagined it

would squirt right out of your grasp again.

Ferron was confident it represented sufficient mass for a full-grown adult. But how, exactly, did you manage to just . . . invert someone?

The Sub-Inspector stepped back from the corpse to turn a slow, considering circle.

The flat was set for entertaining. The bed, the appliances were folded away. The western-style table was elevated and extended for dining, a shelf disassembled for chairs. There was a workspace in one corner, not folded away — Ferron presumed — because of the sheer inconvenience of putting away that much mysterious, technical-looking equipment. Depth projections in spare, modernist frames adorned the wall behind: enhanced-color images of a gorgeous cacophony of stars. Something from one of the orbital telescopes, probably, because there were too many thousands of them populating the sky for Ferron to recognize the navagraha — the signs of the Hindu Zodiac — despite her education.

In the opposite corner of the apt, where you would see it whenever you raised your eyes from the workstation, stood a brass Ganesha. The small offering tray before him held packets of kumkum and turmeric, fragrant blossoms, an antique American dime, a crumbling, unburned stick of agarbathi thrust into a banana. A silk shawl, as indigo as the midnight heavens, lay draped across the god's brass thighs.

"Cute," said Indrapramit dryly, following her gaze. "The Yank is going native."

At the dinner table, two western-style place settings anticipated what Ferron guessed would have been a romantic evening. If one of the principles had not gotten himself turned inside out.

"Where's the cat?" Indrapramit said, gesturing to the fading paw-print trails. He seemed calm, Ferron decided.

And she needed to stop hovering over him like she expected the cracks to show any second. Because she was only going to make him worse by worrying. He'd been back on the job for a month and a half now: It was time for her to relax. To trust the seven years they had been partners and friends, and to trust him to know what he needed as he made his transition back to active duty — and how to ask for it.

Except that would mean laying aside her displacement behavior, and dealing with her own problems.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Ferron admitted. “Hiding from the farang, I imagine. Here, puss puss. Here puss — ”

She crossed to the cabinets and rummaged inside. There was a bowl of water, almost dry, and an empty food bowl in a corner by the sink. The food would be close by.

It took her less than thirty seconds to locate a tin decorated with fish skeletons and paw prints. Inside, gray-brown pellets smelled oily. She set the bowl on the counter and rattled a handful of kibble into it.

“Miaow?” something said from a dark corner beneath the lounge that probably converted into Coffin’s bed.

“Puss puss puss?” She picked up the water bowl, washed it out, filled it up again from the potable tap. Something lofted from the floor to the countertop and headbutted her arm, purring madly. It was a last-year’s-generation parrot-cat, a hyacinth-blue puffball on sun-yellow paws rimmed round the edges with brownish stains. It had a matching tuxedo ruff and goatee and piercing golden eyes that caught and concentrated the filtered sunlight.

“Now, are you supposed to be on the counter?”

“Miaow,” the cat said, cocking its head inquisitively. It didn’t budge.

Indrapramit was at Ferron’s elbow. “Doesn’t it talk?”

“Hey, Puss,” Ferron said. “What’s your name?”

It sat down, balanced neatly on the rail between sink and counter-edge, and flipped its blue fluffy tail over its feet. Its purr vibrated its whiskers and the long hairs of its ruff. Ferron offered it a bit of kibble, and it accepted ceremoniously.

“Must be new,” Indrapramit said. “Though you’d expect an adult to have learned to talk in the cattery.”

“Not new.” Ferron offered a fingertip to the engineered animal. It squeezed its eyes at her and deliberately wiped first one side of its muzzle against her areactin glove, and then the other. “Did you see the cat hair on the lounge?”

Indrapramit paused, considering. “Wiped.”

“Our only witness. And she has amnesia.” She turned to Indrapramit. “We need to find out who Coffin was expecting. Pull transit records. And I want a five-hour phone track log of every individual who came within fifty meters of this flat between twenty hundred yesterday and when Patrol broke down the doors. Let’s get some technical people in to figure out what that pile of gear in the

corner is. And who called in the welfare check?"

"Not a lot of help there, boss." Indrapramit's gold-tinted irises flick-scrolled over data — the Constable was picking up a feed skinned over immediate perceptions. Ferron wanted to issue a mild reprimand for inattention to the scene, but it seemed churlish when Indrapramit was following orders. "When he didn't come online this morning for work, his supervisor became concerned. The supervisor was unable to raise him voice or text. He contacted the flat's minder, and when it reported no response to repeated queries, he called for help."

Ferron contemplated the shattered edges of the smashed-in door before returning her attention to the corpse. "I know the door was locked out on emergency mode. Patrol's override didn't work?"

Indrapramit had one of the more deadpan expressions among the deadpan-trained and certified officers of the Bengaluru City Police. "Evidently."

"Well, while you're online, have them bring in a carrier for the witness." She indicated the hyacinth parrot-cat. "I'll take custody of her."

"How do you know it's a her?"

"She has a feminine face. Lotus eyes like Draupadi."

He looked at her.

She grinned. "I'm guessing."

Ferron had turned off all her skins and feeds while examining the crime scene, but the police link was permanent. An icon blinked discreetly in one corner of her interface, its yellow glow unappealing beside the salmon and coral of Coffin's taut-stretched innards. Accepting the contact was just a matter of an eye-flick. There was a decoding shimmer and one side of the interface spawned an image of Coffin in life.

Coffin had not been a visually vivid individual. Unaffected, Ferron thought, unless dressing one's self in sensible medium-pale brown skin and dark hair with classically Brahmin features counted as an affectation. That handle — *Dexter Coffin,* and wouldn't *Sinister Coffin* be a more logical choice? — seemed to indicate a more flamboyant personality. Ferron made a note of that: Out of such small inconsistencies did a homicide case grow.

"So how does one get from this" — Ferron gestured to the image, which should be floating in Indrapramit's interface as well — "to that?" — the corpse on the rug. "In a locked room, no less?"

Indrapramit shrugged. He seemed comfortable enough in the presence of the body, and Ferron wished she could stop examining him for signs of stress. Maybe his rightminding was working. It wasn't too much to hope for, and good treatments for post-traumatic stress had been in development since the Naughties.

But Indrapramit was a relocant: all his family was in a village somewhere up near Mumbai. He had no people here, and so Ferron felt it was her responsibility as his partner to look out for him. At least, that was what she told herself.

He said, "He swallowed a black hole?"

"I like living in the future." Ferron picked at the edge of an areactin glove. "So many interesting ways to die."

• • • •

Ferron and Indrapramit left the aptblock through the crowds of Coffin's neighbors. It was a block of unrelateds. Apparently Coffin had no family in Bengaluru, but it nevertheless seemed as if every (living) resident had heard the news and come down. The common areas were clogged with grans and youngers, sibs and parents and cousins — all wailing grief, trickling tears, leaning on each other, being interviewed by newsies and blogbots. Ferron took one look at the press in the living area and on the street beyond and juggled the cat carrier into her left hand. She slapped a stripped-off palm against the courtyard door. It swung open — you couldn't lock somebody in — and Ferron and Indrapramit stepped out into the shade of the household sunfarm.

The trees were old. This block had been here a long time; long enough that the sunfollowing black vanes of the lower leaves were as long as Ferron's arm. Someone in the block maintained them carefully, too — they were polished clean with soft cloth, no clogging particles allowed to remain. Condensation trickled down the clear tubules in their trunks to pool in underground catchpots.

Ferron leaned back against a trunk, basking in the cool, and yawned.

"You okay, boss?"

"Tired," Ferron said. "If we hadn't caught the homicide — if it is a homicide — I'd be on a crash cycle now. I had to re-up, and there'll be hell to pay once it wears off."

"Boss — "

“It’s only my second forty-eight hours,” Ferron said, dismissing Indrapramit’s concern with a ripple of her fingers. Gold rings glinted, but not on her wedding finger. Her short nails were manicured in an attempt to look professional, a reminder not to bite. “I’d go hypomanic for weeks at a time at University. Helps you cram, you know.”

Indrapramit nodded. He didn’t look happy.

The Sub-Inspector shook the residue of the areactin from her hands before rubbing tired eyes with numb fingers. Feeds jittered until the movement resolved. Mail was piling up — press requests, paperwork. There was no time to deal with it now.

“Anyway,” Ferron said. “I’ve already reupped, so you’re stuck with me for another forty at least. Where do you think we start?”

“Interview lists,” Indrapramit said promptly. Climbing figs hung with ripe fruit twined the sunfarm; gently, the Senior Constable reached up and plucked one. When it popped between his teeth, its intense gritty sweetness echoed through the interface. It was a good fig.

Ferron reached up and stole one too.

“Miaow?” said the cat.

“Hush.” Ferron slicked tendrils of hair bent on escaping her conservative bun off her sweating temples. “I don’t know how you can wear those boots.”

“State of the art materials,” he said. Chewing a second fig, he jerked his chin at her practical sandals. “Chappals when you might have to run through broken glass, or kick down a door?”

She let it slide into silence. “Junior grade can handle the family for now. It’s bulk interviews. I’ll take Chairman Miaow here to the tech and get her scanned. Wait, Coffin was Employed? Doing what, and by whom?”

“Physicist,” Indrapramit said, linking a list of coworker and project names, a brief description of the biotech firm Coffin had worked for, like half of Employed Bengaluru ever since the medical tourism days. It was probably a better job than homicide cop. “Distributed. Most of his work group aren’t even in this time zone.”

“What does BioShell need with physicists?”

Silently, Indrapramit pointed up at the vanes of the suntrees, clinking faintly in their infinitesimal movements as they tracked the sun. “Quantum bioengineer,” he explained, after a suitable pause.

“Right,” Ferron said. “Well, Forensic will want us out from

underfoot while they process the scene. I guess we can start drawing up interview lists."

"Interview lists and lunch?" Indrapramit asked hopefully.

Ferron refrained from pointing out that they had just come out of an apt with an inside-out stiff in it. "Masala dosa?"

Indrapramit grinned. "I saw an SLV down the street."

"I'll call our tech," Ferron said. "Let's see if we can sneak out the service entrance and dodge the press."

• • • •

Ferron and Indrapramit (and the cat) made their way to the back gate. Indrapramit checked the security cameras on the alley behind the block: His feed said it was deserted except for a waste management vehicle. But as Ferron presented her warrant card — encoded in cloud, accessible through the Omni she wore on her left hip to balance the stun pistol — the energy-efficient safety lights ringing the doorway faded from cool white to a smoldering yellow, and then cut out entirely.

"Bugger," Ferron said. "Power cut."

"How, in a block with a sunfarm?"

"Loose connection?" she asked, rattling the door against the bolt just in case it had flipped back before the juice died. The cat protested. Gently, Ferron set the carrier down, out of the way. Then she kicked the door in frustration and jerked her foot back, cursing. Chappals, indeed.

Indrapramit regarded her mildly. "You shouldn't have re-upped."

She arched an eyebrow at him and put her foot down on the floor gingerly. The toes protested. "You suggesting I should modulate my stress response, Constable?"

"As long as you're adjusting your biochemistry . . ."

She sighed. "It's not work," she said. "It's my mother. She's gone Atavistic, and — "

"Ah," Indrapramit said. "Spending your inheritance on virtual life?"

Ferron turned her face away. Worse, she texted. She's not going to be able to pay her archiving fees.

— Isn't she on assistance? Shouldn't the dole cover that?

— Yeah, but she lives in A.R. She's always been a gamer, but since Father died . . . it's an addiction. She archives everything. And

has since I was a child. We're talking terabytes. Petabytes. Yottabytes. I don't know. and she's after me to "borrow" the money.

"Ooof," he said. "That's a tough one." Briefly, his hand brushed her arm: sympathy and human warmth.

She leaned into it before she pulled away. She didn't tell him that she'd been paying those bills for the past eighteen months, and it was getting to the point where she couldn't support her mother's habit any more. She knew what she had to do. She just didn't know how to make herself do it.

Her mother was her mother. She'd built everything about Ferron, from the DNA up. The programming to honor and obey ran deep. Duty. Felicity. Whatever you wanted to call it.

In frustration, unable to find the words for what she needed to explain properly, she said, "I need to get one of those black market DNA patches and reprogram my overengineered genes away from filial devotion."

He laughed, as she had meant. "You can do that legally in Russia."

"Gee," she said. "You're a help. Hey, what if we — " Before she could finish her suggestion that they slip the lock, the lights glimmered on again and the door, finally registering her override, clicked.

"There," Indrapramit said. "Could have been worse."

"Miaow," said the cat.

"Don't worry, Chairman," Ferron answered. "I wasn't going to forget *you."*

• • • •

The street hummed: autorickshaws, glidecycles, bikes, pedestrials, and swarms of foot traffic. The babble of languages: Kannada, Hindi, English, Chinese, Japanese. Coffin's aptblock was in one of the older parts of the New City. It was an American ghetto: Most of the residents had come here for work, and spoke English as a primary — sometimes an only — language. In the absence of family to stay with, they had banded together. Coffin's address had once been trendy and now, fifty years after its conversion, was fallen on — not hard times, exactly, but a period of more moderate means. The street still remembered better days. It was bulwarked on both sides by the shaggy green cubes of

aptblocks, black suntrees growing through their centers, but what lined each avenue were the feathery cassia trees, their branches dripping pink, golden, and terra-cotta blossoms.

Cassia, Ferron thought. A Greek word of uncertain antecedents, possibly related to the English word Cassia, meaning Chinese or mainland cinnamon. But these trees were not spices; indeed, the black pods of the golden cassia were a potent medicine in Ayurvedic traditions, and those of the rose cassia had been used since ancient times as a purgative for horses.

Ferron wiped sweat from her forehead again, and — speaking of horses — reined in the overly helpful commentary of her classical education.

The wall- and roofgardens of the aptblocks demonstrated a great deal about who lived there. The Coffin kinblock was well tended, green and lush, dripping with brinjal and tomatoes. A couple of youngers — probably still in schooling, even if they weren't Employment track — clambered up and down ladders weeding and feeding and harvesting, and cleaning the windows shaded here and there by the long green trail of sweet potato vines. But the next kinship block down was sere enough to draw a fine, the suntrees in its court sagging and miserable-looking. Ferron could make out the narrow tubes of drip irrigators behind crisping foliage on the near wall.

Ferron must have snorted, because Indrapramit said, "What are they doing with their greywater, then?"

"Maybe it's abandoned?" Unlikely. Housing in the New City wasn't exactly so plentiful that an empty block would remain empty for long.

"Maybe they can't afford the plumber."

That made Ferron snort again, and start walking. But she snapped an image of the dying aptblock nonetheless, and emailed it to Environmental Services. They'd handle the ticket, if they decided the case warranted one.

The Sri Lakshmi Venkateshwara — SLV — was about a hundred meters on, an open-air food stand shaded by a grove of engineered neem trees, their panel leaves angling to follow the sun. Hunger hadn't managed to penetrate Ferron's re-upped hypomania yet, but it would be a good idea to eat anyway: The brain might not be in any shape to notice that the body needed maintenance, but failing to provide that maintenance just added extra interest to the bill

when it eventually came due.

Ferron ordered an enormous, potato-and-pea stuffed crepe against Indrapramit's packet of samosas, plus green coconut water. Disdaining the SLV's stand-up tables, they ventured a little further along the avenue until they found a bench to eat them on. News and ads flickered across the screen on its back. Ferron set the cat carrier on the seat between them.

Indrapramit dropped a somebody-else's-problem skin around them for privacy and unwrapped his first samosa. Flocks of green and yellow parrots wheeled in the trees nearby; the boldest dozen fluttered down to hop and scuffle where the crumbs might fall. You couldn't skin yourself out of the perceptions of the unwired world.

Indrapramit raised his voice to be heard over their arguments. "You shouldn't have re-upped."

The dosa was good — as crisp as she wanted, served with a smear of red curry. Ferron ate most of it, meanwhile grab-and-pasting names off of Coffin's known associates lists onto an interfaced interview plan, before answering.

"Most homicides are closed — if they get closed — in the first forty-eight hours. It's worth a little hypomania binge to find Coffin's killer."

"There's more than one murder every two days in this city, boss."

"Sure." She had a temper, but this wasn't the time to exercise it. She knew, given her family history, Indrapramit worried secretly that she'd succumb to addiction and abuse of the rightminding chemicals. The remaining bites of the dosa got sent to meet their brethren, peas popping between her teeth. The wrapper went into the recycler beside the bench. "But we don't catch every case that flies through."

Indrapramit tossed wadded-up paper at Ferron's head. Ferron batted it into that recycler, too. "No, yaar. Just all of them this week."

The targeted ads bleeding off the bench-back behind Ferron were scientifically designed to attract her attention, which only made them more annoying. Some too-attractive citizen squalled about rightminding programs for geriatrics ("Bring your parents into the modern age!"), and the news — in direct, loud counterpoint — was talking about the latest orbital telescope discoveries: Apparently a star some twenty thousand light years away, in the Andromeda

Galaxy, had suddenly begun exhibiting a flickering pattern that some astronomers considered a possible precursor to a nova event.

The part of her brain that automatically built such parallels said: *Andromeda. Contained within the span of Uttara Bhadrapada. The twenty-sixth nakshatra in Hindu astronomy, although she was not a sign of the Zodiac to the Greeks.* Pegasus was also in Uttara Bhadrapada. Ferron devoted a few more cycles to wondering if there was any relationship other than coincidental between the legendary serpent Ahir Budhnya, the deity of Uttara Bhadrapada, and the sea monster Cetus, set to eat — *devour,* the Greeks were so melodramatic — the chained Andromeda.

The whole thing fell under the influence of the god Aryaman, whose path was the Milky Way — the Heavenly Ganges.

You're overqualified, madam. Oh, she could have been the professor, the academic her mother had dreamed of making her, in all those long hours spent in virtual reproductions of myths the world around. She could have been. But if she'd really wanted to make her mother happy, she would have pursued Egyptology, too.

But she wasn't, and it was time she got her mind back on the job she *did* have.

Ferron flicked on the feeds she'd shut off to attend the crime scene. She didn't like to skin on the job: A homicide cop's work depended heavily on unfiltered perceptions, and if you trimmed everything and everyone irritating or disagreeable out of reality, the odds were pretty good that you'd miss the truth behind a crime. But sometimes you had to make an exception.

She linked up, turned up her spam filters and ad blockers, and sorted more Known Associates files. Speaking of her mother, that required ignoring all those lion-headed message-waiting icons blinking in a corner of her feed — and the pileup of news and personal messages in her assimilator.

Lions. Bengaluru's state capitol was topped with a statue of a four-headed lion, guarding each of the cardinal directions. The ancient symbol of India was part of why Ferron's mother chose that symbolism. But only part.

She set the messages to *hide,* squirming with guilt as she did, and concentrated on the work-related mail.

When she looked up, Indrapramit appeared to have finished both his sorting and his samosas. "All right, what have you got?"

"Just this." She dumped the interview files to his headspace.

The Senior Constable blinked upon receipt. “Ugh. That’s even more than I thought.”

• • • •

First on Ferron’s interview list were the dead man’s coworkers, based on the simple logic that if anybody knew how to turn somebody inside out, it was likely to be another physicist. Indrapramit went back to the aptblock to continue interviewing more-or-less hysterical neighbors in a quest for the name of any potential lover or assignation from the night before.

It was the task least likely to be any fun at all. But then, Ferron was the senior officer. Rank hath its privileges. Someday, Indrapramit would be making junior colleagues follow up horrible gutwork.

The bus, it turned out, ran right from the corner where Coffin’s kinblock’s street intercepted the main road. Proximity made her choose it over the mag-lev Metro, but she soon regretted her decision, because it then wound in a drunken pattern through what seemed like the majority of Bengaluru.

She was lucky enough to find a seat — it wasn’t a crowded hour. She registered her position with dispatch and settled down to wait and talk to the hyacinth cat, since it was more than sunny enough that no one needed to pedal. She waited it out for the transfer point anyway: *That* bus ran straight to the U District, where BioShell had its offices.

Predictable. Handy for head-hunting, and an easy walk for any BioShell employee who might also teach classes. As it seemed, by the number of Professor So-and-sos on Ferron’s list, that many of them did.

Her tech, a short, wide-bellied man who went by the handle Ravindra, caught up with her while she was still leaned against the second bus’s warm, tinted window. He hopped up the steps two at a time, belying his bulk, and shooed a citizen out of the seat beside Ferron with his investigator’s card.

Unlike peace officers, who had long since been spun out as distributed employees, techs performed their functions amid the equipment and resources of a centralized lab. But today, Ravindra had come equipped for fieldwork. He stood, steadying himself on the grab bar, and spread his kit out on the now-unoccupied aisle

seat while Ferron coaxed the cat from her carrier under the seat.

"Good puss," Ravindra said, riffling soft fur until he found the contact point behind the animal's ears. His probe made a soft, satisfied beep as he connected it. The cat relaxed bonelessly, purring. "You want a complete download?"

"Whatever you can get," Ferron said. "It looks like she's been wiped. She won't talk, anyway."

"Could be trauma, boss," Ravindra said dubiously. "Oh, DNA results are back. That's your inside-out vic, all right. The autopsy was just getting started when I left, and Doc said to tell you that to a first approximation, it looked like all the bits were there, albeit not necessarily in the proper sequence."

"Well, that's a relief." The bus lurched. "At least it's the correct dead guy."

"Miaow," said the cat.

"What is your name, puss?" Ravindra asked.

"Chairman Miaow," the cat said, in a sweet doll's voice.

"Oh, no," Ferron said. "That's just what I've been calling her."

"Huh." Ravindra frowned at the readouts that must be scrolling across his feed. "Did you feed her, boss?"

"Yeah," Ferron said. "To get her out from under the couch."

He nodded, and started rolling up his kit. As he disconnected the probe, he said, "I downloaded everything there was. It's not much. And I'll take a tissue sample for further investigation, but I don't think this cat was wiped."

"But there's nothing — "

"I know," he said. "Not wiped. This one's factory-new. And it's bonded to you. Congratulations, Sub-Inspector. I think you have a cat."

"I can't — " she said, and paused. "I already have a fox. My mother's fox, rather. I'm taking care of it for her."

"Mine," the cat said distinctly, rubbing her blue-and-yellow muzzle along Ferron's uniform sleeve, leaving behind a scraping of azure lint.

"I imagine they can learn to cohabitate." He shouldered his kit. "Anyway, it's unlikely Chairman Miaow here will be any use as a witness, but I'll pick over the data anyway and get back to you. It's not even a gig."

"Damn," she said. "I was hoping she'd seen the killer. So even if she's brand-new . . . why hadn't she bonded to Coffin?"

“He hadn’t fed her,” Ravindra said. “And he hadn’t given her a name. She’s a sweetie, though.” He scratched behind her ears. A funny expression crossed his face. “You know, I’ve been wondering for ages — how did you wind up choosing to be called *Ferron,* anyway?”

“My mother used to say I was stubborn as iron.” Ferron managed to keep what she knew would be a pathetically adolescent shrug off her shoulders. “She was fascinated by Egypt, but I studied Classics — Latin, Greek, Sanskrit. Some Chinese stuff. And I liked the name. Ferrum, iron. She won’t use it. She still uses my cradlename.” *Even when I’m paying her bills.*

The lion-face still blinked there, muted but unanswered. In a fit of irritation, Ferron banished it. It wasn’t like she would forget to call.

Once she had time, she promised the ghost of her mother.

Ravindra, she realized, was staring at her quizzically. “How did a classicist wind up a murder cop?”

Ferron snorted. “You ever try to find Employment as a classicist?”

• • • •

Ravindra got off at the next stop. Ferron watched him walk away, whistling for an autorickshaw to take him back to the lab. She scratched Chairman Miaow under the chin and sighed.

In another few minutes, she reached the university district and disembarked, still burdened with cat and carrier. It was a pleasant walk from the stop, despite the heat of the end of the dry season. It was late June, and Ferron wondered what it had been like before the Shift, when the monsoons would have started already, breaking the back of the heat.

The walk from the bus took under fifteen minutes, the cat a dozy puddle. A patch of sweat spread against Ferron’s summerweight trousers where the carrier bumped softly against her hip. She knew she retraced Coffin’s route on those rare days when he might choose to report to the office.

Nearing the Indian Institute of Science, Ferron became aware that clothing styles were shifting — self-consciously Green Earther living fabric and ironic, ill-fitting student antiques predominated. Between the buildings and the statuary of culture heroes — R.K.

Narayan, Ratan Tata, stark-white with serene or stern expressions — the streets still swarmed, and would until long after nightfall. A prof-caste wearing a live-cloth salwar kameez strutted past; Ferron was all too aware that the outfit would cost a week's salary for even a fairly high-ranking cop.

The majority of these people were Employed. They wore salwar kameez or suits and they had that purpose in their step — unlike most citizens, who weren't in too much of a hurry to get anywhere, especially in the heat of day. It was easier to move in the University quarter, because traffic flowed with intent. Ferron, accustomed to stepping around window-browsing Supplemented and people out for their mandated exercise, felt stress dropping away as the greenery, trees, and gracious old 19th- and 20th-century buildings of the campus rose up on every side.

As she walked under the chin of Mohandas Gandhi, Ferron felt the familiar irritation that female police pioneer Kiran Bedi, one of her own personal idols, was not represented among the statuary. There was hijra activist Shabnam Mausi behind a row of well-tended planters, though, which was somewhat satisfying.

Some people found it unsettling to be surrounded by so much brick, poured concrete, and mined stone — the legacy of cooler, more energy-rich times. Ferron knew that the bulk of the university's buildings were more efficient green structures, but those tended to blend into their surroundings. The overwhelming impression was still that of a return to a simpler time: 1870, perhaps, or 1955. Ferron wouldn't have wanted to see the whole city gone this way, but it was good that some of the history had been preserved.

Having bisected campus, Ferron emerged along a prestigious street of much more modern buildings. No vehicles larger than bicycles were allowed here, and the roadbed swarmed with those, people on foot, and pedestrials. Ferron passed a rack of share-bikes and a newly constructed green building, still uninhabited, the leaves of its suntrees narrow, immature, and furled. They'd soon be spread wide, and the structure fully tenanted.

The BioShell office itself was a showpiece on the ground floor of a business block, with a live receptionist visible behind foggy photosynthetic glass walls. *I'd hate a job where you can't pick your nose in case the pedestrians see it.* Of course, Ferron hadn't chosen to be as decorative as the receptionist. A certain stern plainness helped

get her job done.

"Hello," Ferron said, as the receptionist smoothed brown hair over a shoulder. "I'm Police Sub-Inspector Ferron. I'm here to see Dr. Rao."

"A moment, madam," the receptionist said, gesturing graciously to a chair.

Ferron set heels together in parade rest and — impassive — waited. It was only a few moments before a shimmer of green flickered across the receptionist's iris.

"First door on the right, madam, and then up the stairs. Do you require a guide?"

"Thank you," Ferron said, glad she hadn't asked about the cat. "I think I can find it."

There was an elevator for the disabled, but the stairs were not much further on. Ferron lugged Chairman Miaow through the fire door at the top and paused a moment to catch her breath. A steady hum came from the nearest room, to which the door stood ajar.

Ferron picked her way across a lush biorug sprinkled with violet and yellow flowers and tapped lightly. A voice rose over the hum. "Namaskar!"

Dr. Rao was a slender, tall man whose eyes were framed in heavy creases. He walked forward at a moderate speed on a treadmill, an old-fashioned keyboard and monitor mounted on a swivel arm before him. As Ferron entered, he pushed the arm aside, but kept walking. An amber light flickered green as the monitor went dark: He was charging batteries now.

"Namaskar," Ferron replied. She tried not to stare too obviously at the walking desk.

She must have failed.

"Part of my rightminding, madam," Rao said with an apologetic shrug. "I've fibromyalgia, and mild exercise helps. You must be the Sub-Inspector. How do you take your mandated exercise? You carry yourself with such confidence."

"I am a practitioner of kalari payat," Ferron said, naming a South Indian martial art. "It's useful in my work."

"Well," he said. "I hope you'll see no need to demonstrate any upon me. Is that a cat?"

"Sorry, saab," Ferron said. "It's work-related. She can wait in the hall if you mind — "

"No, not at all. Actually, I love cats. She can come out, if she's

not too scared."

"Oouuuuut!" said Chairman Miaow.

"I guess that settles that." Ferron unzipped the carrier, and the hyacinth parrot-cat sauntered out and leaped up to the treadmill's handrail.

"Niranjana?" Dr. Rao said, in surprise. "Excuse me, madam, but what are you doing with Dr. Coffin's cat?"

"You know this cat?"

"Of course I do." He stopped walking, and scratched the cat under her chin. She stretched her head out like a lazy snake, balanced lightly on four daffodil paws. "She comes here about twice a month."

"New!" the cat disagreed. "Who you?"

"Niranjana, it's Rao. You know me."

"Rrraaao?" she said, cocking her head curiously. Adamantly, she said, "New! My name Chairman Miaow!"

Dr. Rao's forehead wrinkled. To Ferron, over the cat's head, he said, "Is Dexter with you? Is he all right?"

"I'm afraid that's why I'm here," Ferron said. "It is my regretful duty to inform you that Dexter Coffin appears to have been murdered in his home sometime over the night. Saab, law requires that I inform you that this conversation is being recorded. Anything you say may be entered in evidence. You have the right to skin your responses or withhold information, but if you choose to do so, under certain circumstances a court order may be obtained to download and decode associated cloud memories. Do you understand this caution?"

"Oh dear," Dr. Rao said. "When I called the police, I didn't expect — "

"I know," Ferron said. "But do you understand the caution, saab?"

"I do," he said. A yellow peripheral node in Ferron's visual field went green.

She said, "Do you confirm this is his cat?"

"I'd know her anywhere," Dr. Rao said. "The markings are very distinctive. Dexter brought her in quite often. She's been wiped? How awful."

"We're investigating," Ferron said, relieved to be back in control of the conversation. "I'm afraid I'll need details of what Coffin was working on, his contacts, any romantic entanglements, any

professional rivalries or enemies — ”

“Of course,” Dr. Rao said. He pulled his interface back around and began typing. “I’ll generate you a list. As for what he was working on — I’m afraid there are a lot of trade secrets involved, but we’re a biomedical engineering firm, as I’m sure you’re aware. Dexter’s particular project has been applications in four-dimensional engineering.”

“I’m afraid,” Ferron said, “that means nothing to me.”

“Of course.” He pressed a key. The cat peered over his shoulder, apparently fascinated by the blinking lights on the monitor.

The hyperlink blinked live in Ferron’s feed. She accessed it and received a brief education in the theoretical physics of reaching *around* three-dimensional shapes in space-time. A cold sweat slicked her palms. She told herself it was just the second hypomania re-up.

“Closed-heart surgery,” she said. During the medical tourism boom, Bengaluru’s economy had thrived. They’d found other ways to make ends meet now that people no longer traveled so profligately, but the state remained one of India’s centers of medical technology. Ferron wondered about the applications for remote surgery, and what the economic impact of this technology could be.

“Sure. Or extracting an appendix without leaving a scar. Inserting stem cells into bone marrow with no surgical trauma, freeing the body to heal disease instead of infection and wounds. It’s revolutionary. If we can get it working.”

“Saab . . .” She stroked Chairman Miaow’s sleek azure head. “Could it be used as a weapon?”

“Anything can be used as a weapon,” he said. A little too fast? But his skin conductivity and heart rate revealed no deception, no withholding. “Look, Sub-Inspector. Would you like some coffee?”

“I’d love some,” she admitted.

He tapped a few more keys and stepped down from the treadmill. She’d have thought the typing curiously inefficient, but he certainly seemed to get things done fast.

“Religious reasons, saab?” she asked.

“Hmm?” He glanced at the monitor. “No. I’m just an eccentric. I prefer one information stream at a time. And I like to come here and do my work, and keep my home at home.”

“Oh.” Ferron laughed, following him across the office to a set of antique lacquered chairs. Chairman Miaow minced after them, stopping to sniff the unfamiliar rug and roll in a particularly lush

patch. Feeling like she was making a huge confession, Ferron said, "I turn off my feeds sometimes, too. Skin out. It helps me concentrate."

He winked.

She said, "So tell me about Dexter and his cat."

"Well . . ." He glanced guiltily at Chairman Miaow. "She was very advanced. He obviously spent a great deal of time working with her. Complete sentences, conversation on about the level of an imaginative five-year old. That's one of our designs, by the way."

"Parrot-cats?"

"The hyacinth variety. We're working on an *Eclectus* variant for next year's market. Crimson and plum colors. You know they have a much longer lifespan than the root stock? Parrot-cats should be able to live for thirty to fifty years, though of course the design hasn't been around long enough for experimental proof."

"I did not. About Dr. Coffin — " she paused, and scanned the lists of enemies and contacts that Dr. Rao had provided, cross-referencing it with files and the reports of three interviews that had come in from Indrapramit in the last five minutes. Another contact request from her mother blinked away officiously. She dismissed it. "I understand he wasn't born here?"

"He traveled," Dr. Rao said in hushed tones. "From America."

"Huh," Ferron said. "He relocated for a job? Medieval. How did BioShell justify the expense — and the carbon burden?"

"A unique skill set. We bring in people from many places, actually. He was well-liked here: His work was outstanding, and he was charming enough — and talented enough — that his colleagues forgave him some of the . . . vagaries in his rightminding."

"Vagaries . . .?"

"He was a depressive, madam," Dr. Rao said. "Prone to fairly serious fits of existential despair. Medication and surgery controlled it adequately that he was functional, but not completely enough that he was always . . . comfortable."

"When you say existential despair . . .?" Ferron was a past master of the open-ended hesitation.

Dr. Rao seemed cheerfully willing to fill them in for her. "He questioned the worth and value of pretty much every human endeavor. Of existence itself."

"So he was a bit nihilistic?"

"Nihilism denies value. Dexter was willing to believe that

compassion had value — not intrinsic value, you understand. But assigned value. He believed that the best thing a human being could aspire to was to limit suffering."

"That explains his handle."

Dr. Rao chuckled. "It does, doesn't it? Anyway, he was brilliant."

"I assume that means that BioShell will suffer in his absence."

"The fourth-dimension project is going to fall apart without him," Dr. Rao said candidly. "It's going to take a global search to replace him. And we'll have to do it quickly; release of the technology was on the anvil."

Ferron thought about the inside-out person in the midst of his rug, his flat set for an intimate dinner for two. "Dr. Rao . . ."

"Yes, Sub-Inspector?"

"In your estimation, would Dr. Coffin commit suicide?"

He steepled his fingers and sighed. "It's . . . possible. But he was very devoted to his work, and his psych evaluations did not indicate it as an immediate danger. I'd hate to think so."

"Because you'd feel like you should have done more? You can't save somebody from themselves, Dr. Rao."

"Sometimes," he said, "a word in the dark is all it takes."

"Dr. Coffin worked from home. Was any of his lab equipment there? Is it possible that he died in an accident?"

Dr. Rao's eyebrows rose. "Now I'm curious about the nature of his demise, I'm afraid. He should not have had any proprietary equipment at home: We maintain a lab for him here, and his work at home should have been limited to theory and analysis. But of course he'd have an array of interfaces."

The coffee arrived, brought in by a young man with a ready smile who set the tray on the table and vanished again without a word. No doubt pleased to be Employed.

As Dr. Rao poured from a solid old stoneware carafe, he transitioned to small talk. "Some exciting news about the Andromeda Galaxy, isn't it? They've named the star Al-Rahman."

"I thought stars were named by coordinates and catalogue number these days."

"They are," Rao said. "But it's fitting for this one have a little romance. People being what they are, someone would have named it if the science community didn't. And Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sufi was the first astronomer to describe the Andromeda Galaxy, around 960 A.D. He called it the 'little cloud.' It's also called Messier 31 — ."

“Do you think it’s a nova precursor, saab?”

He handed her the coffee — something that smelled pricy and rich, probably from the hills — and offered cream and sugar. She added a lump of the latter to her cup with the tongs, stirred in cream, and selected a lemon biscuit from the little plate he nudged toward her.

“That’s what they said on the news,” he said.

“Meaning you don’t believe it?”

“You’re sharp,” he said admiringly.

“I’m a homicide investigator,” she said.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small injection kit. The hypo hissed alarmingly as he pressed it to his skin. He winced.

“Insulin?” she asked, restraining herself from an incredibly rude question about why he hadn’t had stem cells, if he was diabetic.

He shook his head. “Scotophobin. Also part of my rightminding. I have short-term memory issues.” He picked up a chocolate biscuit and bit into it decisively.

She’d taken the stuff herself, in school and when cramming for her police exams. She also refused to be derailed. “So you don’t think this star — ”

“Al-Rahman.”

“ — Al-Rahman. You don’t think it’s going nova?”

“Oh, it might be,” he said. “But what would you say if I told you that its pattern is a repeating series of prime numbers?”

The sharp tartness of lemon shortbread turned to so much grit in her mouth. “I beg your pardon.”

“Someone is signaling us,” Dr. Rao said. “Or I should say, *was* signaling us. A long, long time ago. Somebody with the technology necessary to tune the output of their star.”

“Explain,” she said, setting the remainder of the biscuit on her saucer.

“Al-Rahman is more than two and a half million light years away. That means that the light we’re seeing from it was modulated when the first identifiable humans were budding off the hominid family tree. Even if we could send a signal back . . . The odds are very good that they’re all gone now. It was just a message in a bottle. *We were here.”*

“The news said twenty thousand light years.”

“The news.” He scoffed. “Do they ever get police work right?”

“Never,” Ferron said fervently.

“Science either.” He glanced up as the lights dimmed. “Another brownout.”

An unformed idea tickled the back of Ferron’s mind. “Do you have a sunfarm?”

“BioShell is entirely self-sufficient,” he confirmed. “It’s got to be a bug, but we haven’t located it yet. Anyway, it will be back up in a minute. All our important equipment has dedicated power supplies.”

He finished his biscuit and stirred the coffee thoughtfully while he chewed. “The odds are that the universe is — or has been — full of intelligent species. And that we will never meet any of them. Because the distances and time scales are so vast. In the two hundred years we’ve been capable of sending signals into space — well. Compare that in scale to Al-Rahman.”

“That’s awful,” Ferron said. “It makes me appreciate Dr. Coffin’s perspective.”

“It’s terrible,” Dr. Rao agreed. “Terrible and wonderful. In some ways I wonder if that’s as close as we’ll ever get to comprehending the face of God.”

They sipped their coffee in contemplation, facing one another across the tray and the low lacquered table.

“Milk?” said Chairman Miaow. Carefully, Ferron poured some into a saucer and gave it to her.

Dr. Rao said, “You know, the Andromeda Galaxy and our own Milky Way are expected to collide eventually.”

“Eventually?”

He smiled. It did good things for the creases around his eyes. “Four and a half billion years or so.”

Ferron thought about Uttara Bhadrapada, and the Heavenly Ganges, and Aryaman’s house — in a metaphysical sort of sense — as he came to walk that path across the sky. From so far away it took two and a half million years just to *see* that far.

“I won’t wait up, then.” She finished the last swallow of coffee and looked around for the cat. “I don’t suppose I could see Dr. Coffin’s lab before I go?”

“Oh,” said Dr. Rao. “I think we can do that, and better.”

• • • •

The lab space Coffin had shared with three other researchers

belied BioShell's corporate wealth. It was a maze of tables and unidentifiable equipment in dizzying array. Ferron identified a gene sequencer, four or five microscopes, and a centrifuge, but most of the rest baffled her limited knowledge of bioengineering. She was struck by the fact that just about every object in the room was dressed in BioShell's livery colors of emerald and gold, however.

She glimpsed a conservatory through a connecting door, lush with what must be prototype plants; at the far end of the room, rows of condensers hummed beside a revolving door rimed with frost. A black-skinned woman in a lab coat with her hair clipped into short, tight curls had her eyes to a lens and her hands in waldo sleeves. Microsurgery?

Dr. Rao held out a hand as Ferron paused beside him. "Will we disturb her?"

"Dr. Nnebuogor will have skinned out just about everything except the fire alarm," Dr. Rao said. "The only way to distract her would be to go over and give her a shove. Which — " he raised a warning finger " — I would recommend against, as she's probably engaged in work on those next-generation parrot-cats I told you about now."

"Nnebuogor? She's Nigerian?"

Dr. Rao nodded. "Educated in Cairo and Bengaluru. Her coming to work for BioShell was a real coup for us."

"You *do* employ a lot of farang," Ferron said. "And not by telepresence." She waited for Rao to bridle, but she must have gotten the tone right, because he shrugged.

"Our researchers need access to our lab."

"Miaow," said Chairman Miaow.

"Can she?" Ferron asked.

"We're cat-friendly," Rao said, with a flicker of a smile, so Ferron set the carrier down and opened its door. Rao's heart rate was up a little, and she caught herself watching sideways while he straightened his trousers and picked lint from his sleeve.

Chairman Miaow emerged slowly, rubbing her length against the side of the carrier. She gazed up at the equipment and furniture with unblinking eyes and soon she gathered herself to leap onto a workbench, and Dr. Rao put a hand out firmly.

"No climbing or jumping," he said. "Dangerous. It will hurt you."

"Hurt?" The cat drew out the Rs in a manner so adorable it had to be engineered for. "No jump?"

“No.” Rao turned to Ferron. “We’ve hardwired in response to the No command. I think you’ll find our parrot-cats superior to unengineered felines in this regard. Of course . . . they’re still cats.”

“Of course,” Ferron said. She watched as Chairman Miaow explored her new environment, rubbing her face on this and that. “Do you have any pets?”

“We often take home the successful prototypes,” he said. “It would be a pity to destroy them. I have a parrot-cat — a red-and-gray — and a golden lemur. Engineered, of course. The baseline ones are protected.”

As they watched, the hyacinth cat picked her way around, sniffing every surface. She paused before one workstation in particular before cheek-marking it, and said in comically exaggerated surprise: “Mine! My smell.”

There was a synthetic-fleece-lined basket tucked beneath the table. The cat leaned towards it, stretching her head and neck, and sniffed deeply and repeatedly.

“Have you been here before?” Ferron asked.

Chairman Miaow looked at Ferron wide-eyed with amazement at Ferron’s patent ignorance, and declared “New!”

She jumped into the basket and snuggled in, sinking her claws deeply and repeatedly into the fleece.

Ferron made herself stop chewing her thumbnail. She stuck her hand into her uniform pocket. “Are all your hyacinths clones?”

“They’re all closely related,” Dr. Rao had said. “But no, not clones. And even if she were a clone, there would be differences in the expression of her tuxedo pattern.”

At that moment, Dr. Nnebuogor sighed and backed away from her machine, withdrawing her hands from the sleeves and shaking out the fingers like a musician after practicing. She jumped when she turned and saw them. “Oh! Sorry. I was skinned. Namaskar.”

“Miaow?” said the cat in her appropriated basket.

“Hello, Niranjana. Where’s Dexter?” said Dr. Nnebuogor. Ferron felt the scientist reading her meta-tags. Dr. Nnebuogor raised her eyes to Rao. “And — pardon, officer — what’s with the copper?”

“Actually,” Ferron said, “I have some bad news for you. It appears that Dexter Coffin was murdered last night.”

“Murdered . . .” Dr. Nnebuogor put her hand out against the table edge. *“Murdered?”*

“Yes,” Ferron said. “I’m Police Sub-Inspector Ferron — ” which

Dr. Nnebuogor would know already. “ — and I’m afraid I need to ask you some questions. Also, I’ll be contacting the other researchers who share your facilities via telepresence. Is there a private area I can use for that?”

Dr. Nnebuogor looked stricken. The hand that was not leaned against the table went up to her mouth. Ferron’s feed showed the acceleration of her heart, the increase in skin conductivity as her body slicked with cold sweat. Guilt or grief? It was too soon to tell.

“You can use my office,” Dr. Rao said. “Kindly, with my gratitude.”

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The interviews took the best part of the day and evening, when all was said and done, and garnered Ferron very little new information — yes, people *would* probably kill for what Coffin was — had been — working on. No, none of his colleagues had any reason to. No, he had no love life of which they were aware.

Ferron supposed she technically *could* spend all night lugging the cat carrier around, but her own flat wasn’t too far from the University district. It was in a kinship block teaming with her uncles and cousins, her grandparents, great-grandparents, her sisters and their husbands (and in one case, wife). The fiscal support of shared housing was the only reason she’d been able to carry her mother as long as she had.

She checked out a pedestrial because she couldn’t face the bus and she felt like she’d done more than her quota of steps before dinnertime — and here it was, well after. The cat carrier balanced on the grab bar, she zipped it unerringly through the traffic, enjoying the feel of the wind in her hair and the outraged honks cascading along the double avenues.

She could make the drive on autopilot, so she used the other half of her attention to feed facts to the Department’s expert system. Doyle knew everything about everything, and if it wasn’t self-aware or self-directed in the sense that most people meant when they said *artificial intelligence,* it still rivaled a trained human brain when it came to picking out patterns — and being supercooled, it was significantly faster.

She even told it the puzzling bits, such as how Chairman Miaow had reacted upon being introduced to the communal lab that Coffin

shared with three other BioShell researchers.

Doyle swallowed everything Ferron could give it, as fast as she could report. She knew that down in its bowels, it would be integrating that information with Indrapramit's reports, and those of the other officers and techs assigned to the case.

She thought maybe they needed something more. As the pedestrial dropped her at the bottom of her side street, she dropped a line to Damini, her favorite archinformist. "Hey," she said, when Damini answered.

"Hey yourself, boss. What do you need?"

Ferron released the pedestrial back into the city pool. It scurried off, probably already summoned to the next call. Ferron had used her override to requisition it. She tried to feel guilty, but she was already late in attending on her mother — and she'd ignored two more messages in the intervening time. It was probably too late to prevent bloodshed, but there was something to be said for getting the inevitable over with.

"Dig me up everything you can on today's vic, would you? Dexter Coffin, American by birth, employed at BioShell. As far back as you can, any tracks he may have left under any name or handle."

"Childhood dental records and juvenile posts on the *Candyland* message boards," Damini said cheerfully. "Got it. I'll stick it in Doyle when it's done."

"Ping me, too? Even if it's late? I'm upped."

"So will I be," Damini answered. "This could take a while. Anything else?"

"Not unless you have a cure for families."

"Hah," said the archinformist. "Everybody talking, and nobody hears a damned thing anybody else has to say. I'd retire on the proceeds. All right, check in later." She vanished just as Ferron reached the aptblock lobby.

It was after dinner, but half the family was hanging around in the common areas, watching the news or playing games while pretending to ignore it. Ferron knew it was useless to try sneaking past the synthetic marble-floored chambers with their charpoys and cushions, the corners lush with foliage. Attempted stealth would only encourage them to detain her longer.

Dr. Rao's information about the prime number progression had leaked beyond scientific circles — or been released — and an endless succession of talking heads were analyzing it in less

nuanced terms than he'd managed. The older cousins asked Ferron if she'd heard the news about the star; two sisters and an uncle told her that her mother had been looking for her. *All* the nieces and nephews and small cousins wanted to look at the cat.

Ferron's aging mausi gave her five minutes on how a little cosmetic surgery would make her much more attractive on the marriage market, and shouldn't she consider lightening that mahogany-brown skin to a "prettier" wheatish complexion? A plate of idlis and sambaar appeared as if by magic in mausi's hand, and from there transferred to Ferron's. "And how are you ever going to catch a man if you're so skinny?"

It took Ferron twenty minutes to maneuver into her own small flat, which was still set for sleeping from three nights before. Smoke came trotting to see her, a petite-footed drift of the softest silver-and-charcoal fur imaginable, from which emerged a laughing triangular face set with eyes like black jewels. His ancestors had been foxes farmed for fur in Russia. Researchers had experimented on them, breeding for docility. It turned out it only took a few generations to turn a wild animal into a house pet.

Ferron was a little uneasy with the ethics of all that. But it hadn't stopped her from adopting Smoke when her mother lost interest in him. Foxes weren't the hot trend anymore; the fashion was for engineered cats and lemurs — and skinpets, among those who wanted to look daring.

Having rushed home, she was now possessed by the intense desire to delay the inevitable. She set Chairman Miaow's carrier on top of the cabinets and took Smoke out into the sunfarm for a few minutes of exercise in the relative cool of night. When he'd chased parrots in circles for a bit, she brought him back in, cleaned his litterbox, and stripped off her sweat-stiff uniform to have a shower. She was washing her hair when she realized that she had no idea what to feed Chairman Miaow. Maybe she could eat fox food? Ferron would have to figure out some way to segregate part of the flat for her . . . at least until she was sure that Smoke didn't think a parrot-cat would make a nice midnight snack.

She dressed in off-duty clothes — barefoot in a salwar kameez — and made an attempt at setting her furniture to segregate her flat. Before she left, she placed offering packets of kumkum and a few marigolds from the patio boxes in the tray before her idol of Varuna, the god of agreement, order, and the law.

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Ferron didn't bother drying her hair before she presented herself at her mother's door. If she left it down, the heat would see to that soon enough.

Madhuvanthi did not rise to admit Ferron herself, as she was no longer capable. The door just slid open to Ferron's presence. As Ferron stepped inside, she saw mostly that the rug needed watering, and that the chaise her mother reclined on needed to be reset — it was sagging at the edges from too long in one shape. She wore not just the usual noninvasive modern interface — contacts, skin conductivity and brain activity sensors, the invisibly fine wires that lay along the skin and detected nerve impulses and muscle micromovements — but a full immersion suit.

Not for the first time, Ferron contemplated skinning out the thing's bulky, padded outline, and looking at her mother the way she wanted to see her. But that would be dishonest. Ferron was here to face her problems, not pretend their nonexistence.

"Hello, Mother," Ferron said.

There was no answer.

Ferron sent a text message. Hello, Mother. You wanted to see me?

The pause was long, but not as long as it could have been. You're late, Tamanna. I've been trying to reach you all day. I'm in the middle of a run right now.

I'm sorry, Ferron said. Someone was murdered.

Text, thank all the gods, sucked out the defensive sarcasm that would have filled up a spoken word. She fiddled the bangles she couldn't wear on duty, just to hear the glass chime.

She could feel her mother's attention elsewhere, her distaste at having the unpleasant realities of Ferron's job forced upon her. That attention would focus on anything but Ferron, for as long as Ferron waited for it. It was a contest of wills, and Ferron always lost. Mother —

Her mother pushed up the faceplate on the V.R. helmet and sat up abruptly. "Bloody hell," she said. "Got killed. That'll teach me to do two things at once. Look, about the archives — "

"Mother," Ferron said, "I can't. I don't have any more savings to give you."

Madhuvanthi said, "They'll *kill* me."

They'll de-archive your virtual history, Ferron thought, but she had the sense to hold her tongue.

After her silence dragged on for fifteen seconds or so, Madhuvanthi said, "Sell the fox."

"He's mine," Ferron said. "I'm not selling him. Mother, you really need to come out of your make-believe world once in a while — "

Her mother pulled the collar of the VR suit open so she could ruffle the fur of the violet-and-teal striped skinpet nestled up to the warmth of her throat. It humped in response, probably vibrating with a comforting purr. Ferron tried not to judge, but the idea of parasitic pets, no matter how fluffy and colorful, made *her* skin crawl.

Ferron's mother said, "Make-believe. And your world isn't?"

"Mother — "

"Come in and see my world sometime before you judge it."

"I've seen your world," Ferron said. "I used to live there, remember? All the time, with you. Now I live out here, and you can, too."

Madhuvanthi's glare would have seemed blistering even in the rainy season. "I'm your mother. You will obey me."

Everything inside Ferron demanded she answer yes. Hard-wired, that duty. Planned for. Programmed.

Ferron raised her right hand. "Can't we get some dinner and — "

Madhuvanthi sniffed and closed the faceplate again. And that was the end of the interview.

Rightminding or not, the cool wings of hypomania or not, Ferron's heart was pounding and her fresh clothing felt sticky again already. She turned and left.

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When she got back to her own flat, the first thing she noticed was her makeshift wall of furniture partially disassembled, a chair/shelf knocked sideways, the disconnected and overturned table top now fallen flat.

"Oh, no." Her heart rose into her throat. She rushed inside, the door forgotten —

Atop a heap of cushions lay Smoke, proud and smug. And against his soft gray side, his fluffy tail flipped over her like a blanket, curled Chairman Miaow, her golden eyes squeezed closed in

pleasure.

"Mine!" she said definitively, raising her head.

"I guess so," Ferron answered. She shut the door and went to pour herself a drink while she started sorting through Indrapramit's latest crop of interviews.

According to everything Indrapramit had learned, Coffin was quiet. He kept to himself, but he was always willing and enthusiastic when it came to discussing his work. His closest companion was the cat — Ferron looked down at Chairman Miaow, who had rearranged herself to take advantage of the warm valley in the bed between Smoke and Ferron's thigh — and the cat was something of a neighborhood celebrity, riding on Coffin's shoulder when he took his exercise.

All in all, a typical portrait of a typical, lonely man who didn't let anyone get too close.

"Maybe there will be more in the archinformation," she said, and went back to Doyle's pattern algorithm results one more damn time.

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After performing her evening practice of kalari payat — first time in three days — Ferron set her furniture for bed and retired to it with her files. She wasn't expecting Indrapramit to show up at her flat, but sometime around two in the morning, the lobby door discreetly let her know she had a visitor. Of course, he knew she'd upped, and since he had no family and lived in a thin-walled dormitory room, he'd need a quiet place to camp out and work at this hour of the night. There wasn't a lot of productive interviewing you could do when all the subjects were asleep — at least, not until they had somebody dead to rights enough to take them down to the jail for interrogation.

His coming to her home meant every other resident of the block would know, and Ferron could look forward to a morning of being quizzed by aunties while she tried to cram her idlis down. It didn't matter that Indrapramit was a colleague, and she was his superior. At her age, any sign of male interest brought unEmployed relatives with too much time on their hands swarming.

Still, she admitted him. Then she extricated herself from between the fox and the cat, wrapped her bathrobe around herself, stomped into her slippers, and headed out to meet him in the hall. At least

keeping their conference to the public areas would limit knowing glances later.

He'd upped, too. She could tell by the bounce in his step and his slightly wild focus. And the fact that he was dropping by for a visit in the dark of the morning.

Lowering her voice so she wouldn't trouble her neighbors, Ferron said, "Something too good to mail?"

"An interesting potential complication."

She gestured to the glass doors leading out to the sunfarm. He followed her, his boots somehow still as bright as they'd been that morning. He must polish them in an anti-static gloss.

She kicked off her slippers and padded barefoot over the threshold, making sure to silence the alarm first. The suntrees were furled for the night, their leaves rolled into funnels that channeled condensation to the roots. There was even a bit of chill in the air.

Ferron breathed in gratefully, wiggling her toes in the cultivated earth. "Let's go up to the roof."

Without a word, Indrapramit followed her up the winding openwork stair hung with bougainvillea, barren and thorny now in the dry season but a riot of color and greenery once the rains returned. The interior walls of the aptblock were mossy and thickly planted with coriander and other Ayurvedic herbs. Ferron broke off a bitter leaf of fenugreek to nibble as they climbed.

At the landing, she stepped aside and tilted her head back, peering up through the potted neem and lemon and mango trees at the stars beyond. A dark hunched shape in the branches of a pomegranate startled her until she realized it was the outline of one of the house monkeys, huddled in sleep. She wondered if she could see the Andromeda Galaxy from here at this time of year. Checking a skymap, she learned that it would be visible — but probably low on the horizon, and not without a telescope in these light-polluted times. You'd have better odds of finding it than a hundred years ago, though, when you'd barely have been able to glimpse the brightest stars. The Heavenly Ganges spilled across the darkness like sequins sewn at random on an indigo veil, and a crooked fragment of moon rode high. She breathed in deep and stepped onto the grass and herbs of the roof garden. A creeping mint snagged at her toes, sending its pungency wide.

"So what's the big news?"

"We're not the only ones asking questions about Dexter Coffin."

Indrapramit flashed her a video clip of a pale-skinned woman with red hair bleached ginger by the sun and a crop of freckles not even the gloss of sunblock across her cheeks could keep down. She was broad-shouldered and looked capable, and the ID codes running across the feed under her image told Ferron she carried a warrant card and a stun pistol.

"Contract cop?" she said, sympathetically.

"I'm fine," he said, before she could ask. He spread his first two fingers opposite his thumb and pressed each end of the V beneath his collarbones, a new nervous gesture. "I got my Chicago block maintained last week, and the reprogramming is holding. I'd tell you if I was triggering. I know that not every contract cop is going to decompensate and start a massacre."

A massacre Indrapramit had stopped the hard way, it happened. "Let me know what you need," she said, because everything else she could have said would sound like a vote of non-confidence.

"Thanks," he said. "How'd it go with your Mother?"

"Gah," she said. "I think *I* need a needle. So what's the contractor asking? And who's employing her?"

"Here's the interesting thing, boss. She's an American too."

"She *couldn't* have made it here this fast. Not unless she started before he died — "

"No," he said. "She's an expat, a former New York homicide detective. Her handle is Morganti. She lives in Hongasandra, and she does a lot of work for American and Canadian police departments. Licensed and bonded, and she seems to have a very good rep."

"Who's she under contract to now?"

"Warrant card says Honolulu."

"Huh." Ferron kept her eyes on the stars, and the dark leaves blowing before them. "Top-tier distributed policing, then. Is it a skip trace?"

"You think he was on the run, and whoever he was on the run from finally caught up with him?"

"It's a working theory." She shrugged. "Damini's supposed to be calling with some background any minute now. Actually, I think I'll check in with her. She's late, and I have to file a twenty-four-hour report with the Inspector in the morning."

With a twitch of her attention, she spun a bug out to Damini and conferenced Indrapramit in.

The archinformist answered immediately. “Sorry, boss,” she said. “I know I’m slow, but I’m still trying to put together a complete picture here. Your dead guy buried his past pretty thoroughly. I can give you a preliminary, though, with the caveat that it’s subject to change.”

“Squirt,” Ferron said, opening her firewall to the data. It came in fast and hard, and there seemed to be kilometers of it unrolling into her feed like an endless bolt of silk. “Oh, dear . . .”

“I know, I know. Do you want the executive summary? Even if it’s also a work in progress? Okay. First up, nobody other than Coffin was in his flat that night, according to netfeed tracking.”

“The other night upon the stair,” Ferron said, “I met a man who wasn’t there.”

Damina blew her bangs out of her eyes. “So either nobody came in, or whoever did is a good enough hacker to eradicate every trace of her presence. Which is not a common thing.”

“Gotcha. What else?”

“Doyle picked out a partial pattern in your feed. Two power cuts in places associated with the crime. It started looking for more, and it identified a series of brownouts over the course of a year or so, all in locations with some connection to Dr. Coffin. Better yet, Doyle identified the cause.”

“I promise I’m holding my breath,” Indrapramit said.

“Then how is it you are talking? Anyway, it’s a smart virus in the power grids. It’s draining power off the lab and household sunfarms at irregular intervals. That power is being routed to a series of chargeable batteries in Coffin’s lab space. Except Coffin didn’t purchase order the batteries.”

“Nnebuogor,” Ferron guessed.

“Two points,” said Damini. “It’s a stretch, but she could have come in to the office today specifically to see if the cops stopped by.”

“She could have . . ..” Indrapramit said dubiously. “You think she killed him because he found out she was stealing power? For what purpose?”

“I’ll get on her email and media,” Damini said. “So here’s my speculation: Imagine this utility virus, spreading through the smart grid from aptblock to aptblock. To commit the murder — nobody had to be in the room with him, not if his four-dimensional manipulators were within range of him. Right? You’d just override

whatever safety protocols there were, and . . . boom. Or squish, if you prefer."

Ferron winced. She didn't. Prefer, that was. "Any sign that the manipulators were interfered with?"

"Memory wiped," Damini said. "Just like the cat. Oh, and the other thing I found out. Dexter Coffin is not our boy's first identity. It's more like his third, if my linguistic and semantic parsers are right about the web content they're picking up. I've got Conan on it too — " Conan was another of the department's expert systems " — and I'm going to go over a selection by hand. But it seems like our decedent had reinvented himself whenever he got into professional trouble, which he did a lot. He had unpopular opinions, and he wasn't shy about sharing them with the net. So he'd make the community too hot to handle and then come back as his own sockpuppet — new look, new address, new handle. Severing all ties to what he was before. I've managed to get a real fix on his last identity, though — "

Indrapramit leaned forward, folding his arms against the chill. "How do you do that? He works in a specialized — a rarified field. I'd guess everybody in it knows each other, at least by reputation. Just how much did he change his appearance?"

"Well," Damini said, "he used to look like this. He must have used some rightminding tactics to change elements of his personality, too. Just not the salient ones. A real chameleon, your arsehole."

She picked a still image out of the datastream and flung it up. Ferron glanced at Indrapramit, whose rakish eyebrows were climbing up his forehead. An East Asian with long, glossy dark hair, who appeared to stand about six inches taller than Dr. Coffin, floated at the center of her perceptions, smiling benevolently.

"Madam, saab," Damini said. "May I present Dr. Jessica Fang."

"Well," Ferron said, after a pause of moderate length. "That takes a significant investment." She thought of Aristotle: As the condition of the mind alters, so too alters the condition of the body, and likewise, as the condition of the body alters, so too alters the condition of the mind.

Indrapramit said, "He has a taste for evocative handles. Any idea why the vanishing act?"

"I'm working on it," Damini said.

"I've got a better idea," said Ferron. "Why don't we ask Detective

Morganti?"

Indrapramit steepled his fingers. "Boss . . ."

"I'll hear it," Ferron said. "It doesn't matter if it's crazy."

"We've been totally sidetracked by the cat issue. Because Chairman Miaow has to be Niranjana, right? Because a clone would have expressed the genes for those markings differently. But she can't be Niranjana, because she's not wiped: She's factory-new."

"Right," Ferron said cautiously.

"So." Indrapramit was enjoying his dramatic moment. "If a person can have cosmetic surgery, why not a parrot-cat?"

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"Chairman Miaow?" Ferron called, as she led Indrapramit into her flat. They needed tea to shake off the early morning chill, and she was beyond caring what the neighbors thought. She needed a clean uniform, too.

"Miaow," said Chairman Miaow, from inside the kitchen cupboard.

"Oh, dear." Indrapamit followed Ferron in. Smoke sat demurely in the middle of the floor, tail fluffed over his toes, the picture of innocence. Ferron pulled wide the cabinet door, which already stood ten inches ajar. There was Chairman Miaow, purring, a shredded packet of tuna fish spreading dribbles of greasy water across the cupboard floor.

She licked her chops ostentatiously and jumped down to the sink lip, where she balanced as preciously as she had in Coffin's flat.

"Cat," Ferron said. She thought over the next few things she wanted to say, and remembered that she was speaking to a parrot-cat. "Don't think you've gotten away with anything. The fox is getting the rest of that."

"Fox food is icky," the cat said. "Also, not enough taurine."

"Huh," Ferron said. She looked over at Indrapramit.

He looked back. "I guess she's learning to talk."

• • • •

They had no problem finding Detective Morganti. The redheaded American woman arrived at Ferron's aptblock with the first rays of sunlight stroking the vertical farms along its flanks. She had been sitting on the bench beside the door, reading something on her

screen, but she looked up and stood as Ferron and Indrapramit exited.

"Sub-Inspector Ferron, I presume? And Constable Indrapramit, how nice to see you again."

Ferron shook her hand. She was even more imposing in person, tall and broad-chested, with the shoulders of a cartoon superhuman. She didn't squeeze.

Morganti continued, "I understand you're the detective of record on the Coffin case."

"Walk with us," Ferron said. "There's a nice French coffee shop on the way to the Metro."

It had shaded awnings and a courtyard, and they were seated and served within minutes. Ferron amused herself by pushing the crumbs of her pastry around on the plate while they talked. Occasionally, she broke a piece off and tucked it into her mouth, washing buttery flakes down with thick, cardamom-scented brew.

"So," she said after a few moments, "what did Jessica Fang do in Honolulu? It's not just the flame wars, I take it. And there's no warrant for her that we could find."

Morganti's eyes rose. "Very efficient."

"Thank you." Ferron tipped her head to Indrapramit. "Mostly his work, and that of my archinformist."

Morganti smiled; Indrapramit nodded silently. Then Morganti said, "She is believed to have been responsible for embezzling almost three million ConDollars from her former employer, eleven years ago in the Hawaiian Islands."

"That'd pay for a lot of identity-changing."

"Indeed."

"But they can't prove it."

"If they could, Honolulu P.D. would have pulled a warrant and virtually extradited her. Him. I was contracted to look into the case ten days ago — " She tore off a piece of a cheese croissant and chewed it thoughtfully. "It took the skip trace this long to locate her. Him."

"Did she do it?"

"Hell yes." She grinned like the American she was. "The question is — well, okay, I realize the murder is your jurisdiction, but I don't get paid unless I either close the case or eliminate my suspect — and I get a bonus if I recover any of the stolen property. Now, 'killed by person or persons unknown,' is a perfectly acceptable

outcome as far as the City of Honolulu is concerned, with the added benefit that the State of Hawaii doesn't have to pay Bengaluru to incarcerate him. So I need to know, one cop to another, if the inside-out stiff is Dexter Coffin."

"The DNA matches," Ferron said. "I can tell you that in confidence. There will be a press release once we locate and notify his next of kin."

"Understood," Morganti said. "I'll keep it under my hat. I'll be filing recovery paperwork against the dead man's assets in the amount of C$2,798,000 and change. I can give you the next of kin, by the way."

The data came in a squirt. Daughter, Maui. Dr. Fang-Coffin really had severed all ties.

"Understood," Ferron echoed. She smiled when she caught herself. She liked this woman. "You realize we have to treat you as a suspect, given your financial motive."

"Of course," Morganti said. "I'm bonded, and I'll be happy to come in for an interrogation under Truth."

"That will make things easier, madam," Ferron said.

Morganti turned her coffee cup in its saucer. "Now then. What can I do to help *you* clear your homicide?"

Indrapramit shifted uncomfortably on the bench.

"What *did* Jessica Fang do, exactly?" Ferron had Damini's data in her case buffer. She could use what Morganti told her to judge the contract officer's knowledge and sincerity.

"In addition to the embezzling? Accused of stealing research and passing it off as her own," Morganti said. "Also, she was — well, she was just kind of an asshole on the net, frankly. Running down colleagues, dismissing their work, aggrandizing her own. She was good, truthfully. But nobody's *that* good."

"Would someone have followed him here for personal reasons?"

"As you may have gathered, this guy was not diligent about his rightminding," Morganti said. She pushed a handful of hair behind her shoulder. "And he was a bit of a narcissist. Sociopath? Antisocial in some sort of atavistic way. Normal people don't just . . . walk away from all their social connections because they made things a little hot on the net."

Ferron thought of the distributed politics of her own workplace, the sniping and personality clashes. And her mother, not so much alone on an electronic Serengeti as haunting the virtual pillared

palaces of an Egypt that never was.

"No," she said.

Morganti said, "Most people find ways to cope with that. Most people don't burn themselves as badly as Jessica Fang did, though."

"I see." Ferron wished badly for sparkling water in place of the syrupy coffee. "You've been running down Coffin's finances, then? Can you share that information?"

Morganti said that he had liquidated a lot of hidden assets a week ago, about two days after she took his case. "It was before I made contact with him, but it's possible he had Jessica Fang flagged for searches — or he had a contact in Honolulu who let him know when the skip trace paid off. He was getting ready to run again. How does that sound?"

Ferron sighed and sat back in her chair. "Fabulous. It sounds completely fabulous. I don't suppose you have any insight into who he might have been expecting for dinner? Or how whoever killed him might have gotten out of the room afterwards when it was all locked up tight on Coffin's override?"

Morganti shrugged. "He didn't have any close friends or romantic relationships. Always too aware that he was living in hiding, I'd guess. Sometimes he entertained co-workers, but I've checked with them all, and none admits having gone to see him that night."

"Sub-Inspector," Indrapramit said gently. "The time."

"Bugger," Ferron said, registering it. "Morning roll call. Catch up with you later?"

"Absolutely," Morganti said. "As I said before, I'm just concerned with clearing my embezzling case. I'm always happy to help a sister officer out on a murder."

And butter up the local police, Ferron thought.

Morganti said, "One thing that won't change. Fang was *obsessed* with astronomy."

"There were deep-space images on Coffin's walls," Ferron said.

Indrapramit said, "And he had offered his Ganesha an indigo scarf. I wonder if the color symbolized something astronomical to him."

"Indigo," Morganti said. "Isn't it funny that we have a separate word for dark blue?"

Ferron felt the pedantry welling up, and couldn't quite stopper it. "Did you know that all over the world, dark blue and black are

often named with the same word? Possibly because of the color of the night sky. And that the ancient Greeks did not have a particular name for the color blue? Thus their seas were famously 'wine-dark.' But in Hindu tradition, the color blue has a special significance: It is the color of Vishnu's skin, and Krishna is nicknamed *Sunil,* 'dark blue.' The color also implies that which is all-encompassing, as in the sky."

She thought of something slightly more obscure. "Also, that color is the color of Shani Bhagavan, who is one of the deities associated with Uttara Bhadrapada. Which we've been hearing a lot about lately. It might indeed have had a lot of significance to Dr. Fang-Coffin."

Morganti, eyebrows drawn together in confusion, looked to Indrapramit for salvation. "Saab? Uttara Bhadrapada?"

Indrapramit said, "Andromeda."

• • • •

Morganti excused herself as Indrapramit and Ferron prepared to check in to their virtual office.

While Ferron organized her files and her report, Indrapramit finished his coffee. "We need to check inbound ships from, or carrying passengers from, America. Honolulu isn't as prohibitive as, say, Chicago."

They'd worked together long enough that half the conversational shifts didn't need to be recorded. "Just in case somebody *did* come here to kill him. Well, there can't be that many passages, right?"

"I'll get Damini after it," he said. "After roll — "

Roll call made her avoidant. There would be reports, politics, wrangling, and a succession of wastes of time as people tried to prove that their cases were more worthy of resources than other cases.

She pinched her temples. At least the coffee here was good. "Right. Telepresencing . . . now."

• • • •

After the morning meeting, they ordered another round of coffees, and Ferron pulled up the sandwich menu and eyed it. There was no telling when they'd have time for lunch.

She'd grab something after the next of kin notification. If she was

still hungry when they were done.

Normally, in the case of a next of kin so geographically distant, Bengaluru Police would arrange for an officer with local jurisdiction to make the call. But the Lahaina Police Department had been unable to raise Jessica Fang's daughter on a home visit, and a little cursory research had revealed that she was unEmployed and very nearly a permanent resident of Artificial Reality.

Just going by her handle, Jessica Fang's daughter on Maui didn't have a lot of professional aspirations. Ferron and Indrapramit had to go virtual and pull on avatars to meet her: Skooter0 didn't seem to come out of her virtual worlds for anything other than biologically unavoidable crash cycles. Since they were on duty, Ferron and Indrapramit's avatars were the standard-issue blanks provided by Bengaluru Police, their virtual uniforms sharply pressed, their virtual faces expressionless and identical.

It wasn't the warm and personal touch you would hope for, Ferron thought, when somebody was coming to tell you your mother had been murdered.

"Why don't you take point on this one?" she said.

Indrapramit snorted. "Be sure to mention my leadership qualities in my next performance review."

They left their bodies holding down those same café chairs and waded through the first few tiers of advertisements — get-rich-quick schemes, Bollywood starlets, and pop star scandal sheets, until they got into the American feed, and then it was get-rich-quick schemes, Hollywood starlets, pornography, and Congressional scandal sheets — until they linked up with the law enforcement priority channel. Ferron checked the address and led Indrapramit into a massively multiplayer artificial reality that showed real-time activity through Skooter0's system identity number. Once provided with the next-of-kin's handle, Damini had sent along a selection of key codes and overrides that got them through the pay wall with ease.

They didn't need a warrant for this. It was just a courtesy call.

Skooter0's preferred hangout was a "historical" AR, which meant in theory that it reflected the pre-21st-century world, and in practice that it was a muddled-up stew of cowboys, ninjas, pinstripe suit mobsters, medieval knights, cavaliers, Mongols, and Wild West gunslingers. There were Macedonians, Mauryans, African gunrunners, French resistance fighters, and Nazis, all running

around together with samurai and Shaolin monks.

Indrapramit's avatar checked a beacon — a glowing green needle floating just above his nonexistent wrist. The directional signal led them through a space meant to evoke an antediluvian ice cave, in which about two dozen people all dressed as different incarnations of the late-twentieth-century pop star David Bowie were working themselves into a martial frenzy as they prepared to go forth and do virtual battle with some rival clade of Emulators. Ferron eyed a Diamond Dog who was being dressed in glittering armor by a pair of Thin White Dukes and was glad of the expressionless surface of her uniform avatar.

She knew what they were supposed to be because she pattern-matched from the web. The music was quaint, but pretty good. The costumes . . . she winced.

Well, it was probably a better way to deal with antisocial aggression than taking it out on your spouse.

Indrapramit walked on, eyes front — not that you needed eyes to see what was going on in here.

At the far end of the ice cave, four 7th-century Norse dwarves delved a staircase out of stone, leading endlessly down. Heat rolled up from the depths. The virtual workmanship was astounding. Ferron and Indrapramit moved past, hiding their admiring glances. Just as much skill went into creating AR beauty as if it were stone.

The ice cave gave way to a forest glade floored in mossy, irregular slates. Set about on those were curved, transparent tables set for chess, go, mancala, cribbage, and similar strategy games. Most of the tables were occupied by pairs of players, and some had drawn observers as well.

Indrapramit followed his needle — and Ferron followed Indrapramit — to a table where a unicorn and a sasquatch were playing a game involving rows of transparent red and yellow stones laid out on a grid according to rules that Ferron did not comprehend. The sasquatch looked up as they stopped beside the table. The unicorn — glossy black, with a pearly, shimmering horn and a glowing amber stone pinched between the halves of her cloven hoof — was focused on her next move.

The arrow pointed squarely between her enormous, lambent golden eyes.

Ferron cleared her throat.

"Yes, officers?" the sasquatch said. He scratched the top of his

head. The hair was particularly silky, and flowed around his long hooked fingernails.

"I'm afraid we need to speak to your friend," Indrapramit said.

"She's skinning you out," the sasquatch said. "Unless you have a warrant — "

"We have an override," Ferron said, and used it as soon as she felt Indrapramit's assent.

The unicorn's head came up, a shudder running the length of her body and setting her silvery mane to swaying. In a brittle voice, she said, "I'd like to report a glitch."

"It's not a glitch," Indrapramit said. He identified himself and Ferron and said, "Are you Skooter0?"

"Yeah," she said. The horn glittered dangerously. "I haven't broken any laws in India."

The sasquatch stood up discreetly and backed away.

"It is my unfortunate duty," Indrapramit continued, "to inform you of the murder of your mother, Dr. Jessica Fang, a.k.a. Dr. Dexter Coffin."

The unicorn blinked iridescent lashes. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're talking about something I have killfiled. I won't be able to hear you until you stop."

Indrapramit's avatar didn't look at Ferron, but she felt his request for help. She stepped forward and keyed a top-level override. "You will hear us," she said to the unicorn. "I am sorry for the intrusion, but we are legally bound to inform you that your mother, Dr. Jessica Fang, a.k.a. Dr. Dexter Coffin, has been murdered."

The unicorn's lip curled in a snarl. "Good. I'm glad."

Ferron stepped back. It was about the response she had expected.

"She made me," the unicorn said. "That doesn't make her my *mother*. Is there anything else you're legally bound to inform me of?"

"No," Indrapramit said.

"Then get the hell out." The unicorn set her amber gaming stone down on the grid. A golden glow encompassed it and its neighbors. "I win."

• • • •

"Warehoused," Indrapramit said with distaste, back in his own body and nibbling a slice of quiche. "And happy about it."

Ferron had a pressed sandwich of vegetables, tapenade, cheeses, and some elaborate and incomprehensible European charcuterie made of smoked vatted protein. It was delicious, in a totally exotic sort of way. “Would it be better if she were miserable and unfulfilled?”

He made a noise of discontentment and speared a bite of spinach and egg.

Ferron knew her combativeness was really all about her mother, not Fang/Coffin’s adult and avoidant daughter. Maybe it was the last remnants of upping, but she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “What she’s doing is not so different from what our brains do naturally, except now it’s by tech/filters rather than prejudice and neurology.”

Indrapramit changed the subject. “Let’s make a virtual tour of the scene.” As an icon blinked in Ferron’s attention space, he added, “Oh, hey. Final autopsy report.”

“Something from Damini, too,” Ferron said. It had a priority code on it. She stepped into an artificial reality simulation of Coffin’s apartment as she opened the contact. The thrill of the chase rose through the fog of her fading hypomania. Upping didn’t seem to stick as well as it had when she was younger, and the crashes came harder now — but real, old-fashioned adrenaline was the cure for everything.

“Ferron,” Ferron said, frowning down at the browned patches on Coffin’s virtual rug. Indrapramit rezzed into the conference a heartbeat later. “Damini, what do the depths of the net reveal?”

“Jackpot,” Damini said. “Did you get a chance to look at the autopsy report yet?”

“We just got done with the next of kin,” Ferron said. “You’re fast — I just saw the icon.”

“Short form,” Damini said, “is that’s not Dexter Coffin.”

Ferron’s avatar made a slow circuit around the perimeter of the virtual murder scene. “There was a *DNA match.* Damini, we just told his daughter he was murdered.”

Indrapramit, more practical, put down his fork in meatspace. His AR avatar mimicked the motion with an empty hand. “So who is it?”

“Nobody,” Damini said. She leaned back, satisfied. “The medical examiner says it’s topologically impossible to turn somebody inside out like that. It’s vatted, whatever it is. A grown object, nominally

alive, cloned from Dexter Coffin's tissue. But it's not Dexter Coffin. I mean, think about it — what organ would that *be,* exactly?"

"Cloned." In meatspace, Ferron picked a puff of hyacinth-blue fur off her uniform sleeve. She held it up where Indrapramit could see it.

His eyes widened. "Yes," he said. "What about the patterns, though?"

"Do I look like a bioengineer to you? Indrapramit," Ferron said thoughtfully. "Does this crime scene look staged to you?"

He frowned. "Maybe."

"Damini," Ferron asked, "how'd you do with Dr. Coffin's files? And Dr. Nnebuogar's files?"

"There's nothing useful in Coffin's email except some terse exchanges with Dr. Nnebuogar very similar in tone to the Jessica Fang papers. Nnebuogar was warning Coffin off her research. But there were no death threats, no love letters, no child support demands."

"Anything he was interested in?"

"That star," Damini said. "The one that's going nova or whatever. He's been following it for a couple of weeks now, before the press release hit the mainstream feeds. Nnebuogar's logins support the idea that she's behind the utility virus, by the way."

"Logins can be spoofed."

"So they can," Damini agreed.

Ferron peeled her sandwich open and frowned down at the vatted charcuterie. It all looked a lot less appealing now. "Nobody came to Coffin's flat. And it turns out the stiff wasn't a stiff after all. So Coffin went somewhere else, after making preparations to flee and then abandoning them."

"And the crime scene was staged," Indrapramit said.

"This is interesting," Damini said. "Coffin hadn't been to the office in a week."

"Since about when Morganti started investigating him. Or when he might have become aware that she was on his trail."

Ferron said something sharp and self-critical and radically unprofessional. And then she said, "I'm an idiot. Leakage."

"Leakage?" Damini asked. "You mean like when people can't stop talking about the crime they actually committed, or the person you're not supposed to know they're having an affair with?"

An *urgent* icon from Ferron's mausi Sandhya — the responsible

auntie, not the fussy auntie — blinked insistently at the edge of her awareness. *Oh Gods, what now?*

"Exactly like that," Ferron said. "Look, check on any hits for Coffin outside his flat in the past ten days. And I need confidential warrants for DNA analysis of the composters at the BioShell laboratory facility and also at Dr. Rao's apartment."

"You think *Rao* killed him?" Damini didn't even try to hide her shock.

Blink, blink went the icon. Emergency. Code red. Your mother has gone beyond the pale, my dear. "Just pull the warrants. I want to see what we get before I commit to my theory."

"Why?" Indrapramit asked.

Ferron sighed. "Because it's crazy. That's why. And see if you can get confidential access to Rao's calendar files and email. I don't want him to know you're looking."

"Wait right there," Damini said. "Don't touch a thing. I'll be back before you know it."

• • • •

"Mother," Ferron said to her mother's lion-maned goddess of an avatar, "I'm sorry. Sandhya's sorry. We're all sorry. But we can't let you go on like this."

It was the hardest thing she'd ever said.

Her mother, wearing Sekhmet's golden eyes, looked at Ferron's avatar and curled a lip. Ferron had come in, not in a uniform avatar, but wearing the battle-scarred armor she used to play in when she was younger, when she and her mother would spend hours Atavistic. That was during her schooling, before she got interested in stopping — or at least avenging — *real* misery.

Was that fair? Her mother's misery was real. So was that of Jessica Fang's abandoned daughter. And this was a palliative — against being widowed, against being bedridden.

Madhuvanthi's lip-curl slowly blossomed into a snarl. "Of course. You can let them destroy this. Take away everything I am. It's not like it's murder."

"Mother," Ferron said, "it's not *real."*

"If it isn't," her mother said, gesturing around the room, "what is, then? I *made* you. I gave you life. You owe me this. Sandhya said you came home with one of those new parrot-cats. Where'd the

money for that come from?"

"Chairman Miaow," Ferron said, "is evidence. And reproduction is an ultimately sociopathic act, no matter what I owe you."

Madhuvanthi sighed. "Daughter, come on one last run."

"You'll have your own memories of all this," Ferron said. "What do you need the archive for?"

"Memory," her mother scoffed. "What's memory, Tamanna? What do you actually remember? Scraps, conflations. How does it compare to being able to *relive?"*

To relive it, Ferron thought, *you'd have to have lived it in the first place.* But even teetering on the edge of fatigue and crash, she had the sense to keep *that* to herself.

"Have you heard about the star?" she asked. Anything to change the subject. "The one the aliens are using to talk to us?"

"The light's four million years old," Madhuvanthi said. "They're all dead. Look, there's a new manifest synesthesia show. Roman and Egyptian. Something for both of us. If you won't come on an adventure with me, will you at least come to an art show? I promise I'll never ask you for archive money again. Just come to this one thing with me? And I promise I'll prune my archive starting tomorrow."

The lioness's brow was wrinkled. Madhuvanthi's voice was thin with defeat. There was no more money, and she knew it. But she couldn't stop bargaining. And the art show was a concession, something that evoked the time they used to spend together, in these imaginary worlds.

"Ferron," she said. Pleading. "Just let me do it myself."

Ferron. They weren't really communicating. Nothing was won. Her mother was doing what addicts always did when confronted — delaying, bargaining, buying time. But she'd call her daughter *Ferron* if it might buy her another twenty-four hours in her virtual paradise.

"I'll come," Ferron said. "But not until tonight. I have some work to do."

• • • •

"Boss. How did you know to look for that DNA?" Damini asked, when Ferron activated her icon.

"Tell me what you found," Ferron countered.

“DNA in the BioShell composter that matches that of Chairman Miaow,” she said, “and therefore that of Dexter Coffin’s cat. And the composter of Rao’s building is just *full* of his DNA. Rao’s. Much, much more than you’d expect. Also, some of his email and calendar data has been purged. I’m attempting to reconstruct — ”

“Have it for the chargesheet,” Ferron said. “I bet it’ll show he had a meeting with Coffin the night Coffin vanished.”

• • • •

Dr. Rao lived not in an aptblock, even an upscale one, but in the Vertical City. Once Damini returned with the results of the warrants, Ferron got her paperwork in order for the visit. It was well after nightfall by the time she and Indrapramit, accompanied by Detective Morganti and four patrol officers, went to confront him.

They entered past shops and the vertical farm in the enormous tower’s atrium. The air smelled green and healthy, and even at this hour of the night, people moved in steady streams towards the dining areas, across lush green carpets.

A lift bore the police officers effortlessly upward, revealing the lights of Bengaluru spread out below through a transparent exterior wall. Ferron looked at Indrapramit and pursed her lips. He raised his eyebrows in reply. *Conspicuous consumption.* But they couldn’t very well hold it against Rao now.

They left Morganti and the patrol officers covering the exit and presented themselves at Dr. Rao’s door.

“Open,” Ferron said formally, presenting her warrant. “In the name of the law.”

The door slid open, and Ferron and Indrapramit entered cautiously.

The flat’s resident must have triggered the door remotely, because he sat at his ease on furniture set as a chaise. A grey cat with red ear-tips crouched by his knee, rubbing the side of its face against his trousers.

“New!” said the cat. “New people! Namaskar! It’s almost time for tiffin.”

“Dexter Coffin,” Ferron said to the tall, thin man. “You are under arrest for the murder of Dr. Rao.”

• • • •

As they entered the lift and allowed it to carry them down the external wall of the Vertical City, Coffin standing in restraints between two of the patrol officers, Morganti said, “So. If I understand this properly, you — Coffin — actually *killed* Rao to assume his identity? Because you knew you were well and truly burned this time?”

Not even a flicker of his eyes indicated that he’d heard her.

Morganti sighed and turned her attention to Ferron. “What gave you the clue?”

“The scotophobin,” Ferron said. Coffin’s cat, in her new livery of gray and red, miaowed plaintively in a carrier. “He didn’t have memory issues. He was using it to cram Rao’s life story and eccentricities so he wouldn’t trip himself up.”

Morganti asked, “But why liquidate his assets? Why not take them with him?” She glanced over her shoulder. “Pardon me for speaking about you as if you were a statue, Dr. Fang. But you’re doing such a good impression of one.”

It was Indrapramit who gestured at the Vertical City rising at their backs. “Rao wasn’t wanting for assets.”

Ferron nodded. “Would you have believed he was dead if you couldn’t find the money? Besides, if his debt — or some of it — was recovered, Honolulu would have less reason to keep looking for him.”

“So it was a misdirect. Like the frame job around Dr. Nnebuogar and the table set for two . . .?”

Her voice trailed off as a stark blue-white light cast knife-edged shadows across her face. Something blazed in the night sky, something as stark and brilliant as a dawning sun — but cold, as cold as light can be. As cold as a reflection in a mirror.

Morganti squinted and shaded her eyes from the shine. “Is that a *hydrogen bomb?”*

“If it was,” Indrapramit said, “Your eyes would be melting.”

Coffin laughed, the first sound he’d made since he’d assented to understanding his rights. “It’s a supernova.”

He raised both wrists, bound together by the restraints, and pointed. “In the Andromeda galaxy. See how low it is to the horizon? We’ll lose sight of it as soon as we’re in the shadow of that tower.”

"Al-Rahman," Ferron whispered. The lift wall was darkening to a smoky shade and she could now look directly at the light. Low to the horizon, as Coffin had said. So bright it seemed to be visible as a sphere.

"Not that star. It was stable. Maybe a nearby one," Coffin said. "Maybe they knew, and that's why they were so desperate to tell us they were out there."

"Could they have *survived* that?"

"Depends how close to Al-Rahman it was. The radiation — " Coffin shrugged in his restraints. "That's probably what killed them."

"God in Heaven," said Morganti.

Coffin cleared his throat. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Ferron craned her head back as the point source of the incredible radiance slipped behind a neighboring building. There was no scatter glow: The rays of light from the nova were parallel, and the shadow they entered uncompromising, black as a pool of ink.

Until this moment, she would have had to slip a skin over her perceptions to point to the Andromeda Galaxy in the sky. But now it seemed like the most important thing in the world that, two and a half million years away, somebody had shouted across the void before they died.

A strange elation filled her. *Everybody talking, and nobody hears a damned thing anyone — even themselves — has to say.*

"We're here," Ferron said to the ancient light that spilled across the sky and did not pierce the shadow into which she descended. As her colleagues turned and stared, she repeated the words like a mantra. "We're here, too! And we heard you."

— for Asha Cat Srinivasan Shipman, and her family

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She is the author of over twenty novels and a hundred short stories, the most recent of which is *Steles of the Sky.* She is a Sturgeon, Campbell, and multiple Hugo Award winner, a rock climber, and a very bad guitarist. She divides her time between central Massachusetts, where her Giant Ridiculous Dog lives, and

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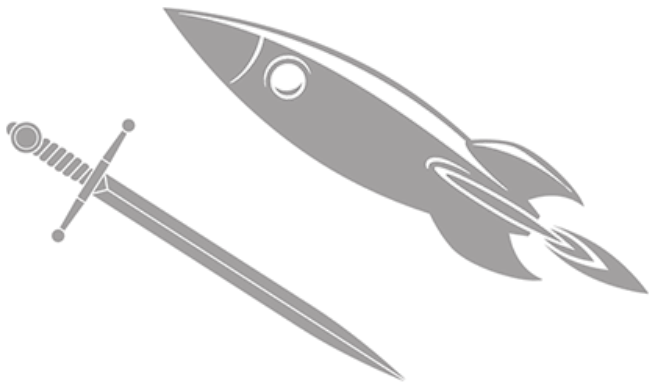
To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight.

NOVEL EXCERPTS



Tor Books Presents
Karen Memory
(novel excerpt)

Elizabeth Bear

You ain't gonna like what I have to tell you, but I'm gonna tell you anyway. See, my name is Karen Memery, like "memory" only spelt with an *e,* and I'm one of the girls what works in the Hôtel Mon Cherie on Amity Street. "Hôtel" has a little hat over the *o* like that. It's French, so Beatrice tells me.

Some call it the Cherry Hotel. But most just say it's Madame Damnable's Sewing Circle and have done. So I guess that makes me a seamstress, just like Beatrice and Miss Francina and Pollywog and Effie and all the other girls. I pay my sewing machine tax to the city, which is fifty dollar a week, and they don't care if your sewing machine's got a foot treadle, if you take my meaning.

Which ain't to say we ain't got a sewing machine. We've got two, an old-style one with a black cast-iron body and a shiny chrome wheel, and one of the new steel-geared brass ones that run on water pressure, such that you stand inside of and move with your whole body, and it does the cutting and stitching and steam pressing, too.

Them two machines sit out in a corner of the parlor as kind of a joke.

I can use the old-fashioned one — I learned to sew, I mean really sew — pretty good after Mama died — and Miss Francina is teaching me to use the new one to do fancywork, though it kind of scares me. And it fits her, so it's big as your grandpa's trousers on me. But the thing is, nobody in Rapid City sells the kind of dresses we parlor girls need, so it's make our own patterned after fashion dolls from Paris and London and New York or it's pay a ladies' tailor two-thirds your wage for something you don't like as well.

But as you can imagine, a house full of ladies like this goes through a lot of frocks and a lot of mending. So it pays to know how to sew both ways, so to speak.

Really pays. Miss Francina and me, we charge less than the

ladies' tailors. And it's easier to do fittings when you live with the girls. And every penny I make goes into the knotted sock in my room for when I get too old for sewing. I have a plan, see.

The richest bit is that the city and the tailors can't complain, can they, when we're paying our sewing machine tax and our guild and union dues, too. Sure, fifty dollar'd be a year's wages back in Hay Camp for a real seamstress and here in Rapid City it'll barely buy you a dozen of eggs, a shot of whiskey, and a couple pair of those new blue jeans that Mr. Strauss is manufacturing. But here in Rapid City a girl can pay fifty dollar a week and still have enough left over to live on and put a little away besides, even after the house's cut.

You want to work for a house, if you're working. I mean . . . working "sewing." Because Madam Damnable is a battleship and she runs the Hôtel Mon Cherie tight, but nobody hits her girls, and we've got an Ancient and Honorable Guild of Seamstresses and nobody's going to make us do anything we really don't want to unless it's by paying us so much we'll consider it in spite of. Not like in the cheap cribs down in the mud beside the pier with the locked doors and no fireplaces, where they keep the Chinese and the Indian girls the sailors use. Those girls, if they're lucky, they work two to a room so they can keep an eye on each other for safety and they got a slicker to throw over the bottom sheet so the tricks' spurs and mud don't ruin it.

I've never been down there, but I've been up along the pier, and you can't hear the girls except once in a while when one goes crazy, crying and screaming. All you can hear up there is the sailors cursing and the dog teams barking in the kennels like they know they're going to be loaded on those deep-keel ships and sent up north to Alaska to probably freeze in the snow and die along with some eastern idiot who's heard there's gold. Sometimes girls go north, too — there's supposed to be good money from the men in the gold camps — but I ain't known but one who made it away again ever.

That was Madame Damnable, and when she came back she had enough to set herself up in business and keep her seamstresses dry and clean. She was also missing half her right foot from gangrene, and five or six teeth from scurvy, so I guess it's up to you to decide if you think that was worth it to her.

She seems pretty happy, and she walks all right with a cane, but it ain't half-hard for her to get up and down the ladders to street

level.

So anyway, about them ladders. Madame Damnable's is in the deep part of town, and they ain't yet finished raising the streets here. What I mean is when they started building up the roads a while back so the sea wouldn't flood the downtown every spring tide they couldn't very well close down all the shopping — and all the sewing — so they built these big old masonry walls and started filling in the streets between them up to the top level with just any old thing they had to throw in there. There's dead horses down there, dead men for all I know. Street signs and old couches and broke-up wagons and such.

They left the sidewalks down here where they had been, and the front doors to the shops and such, so on each block there's this passage between the walls of the street and the walls of the buildings. And since horses can't climb ladders and wagons can't fly, they didn't connect the blocks. Well, I guess they could of built tunnels, but it's bad enough down there on the walkways at night as it is now and worth your life to go out without a couple of good big lantern bearers with a stout cudgel apiece.

At Madame Damnable's, we've got Crispin, who's our doorman and a freed or maybe a runaway slave and about as big as a house. He's the only man allowed to live in the hotel, as he doesn't care for humping with women. He hardly talks and he's real calm and quiet, but you never feel not safe with him standing right behind you, even when you're strong-arming out a drunk or a deadbeat. Especially if Miss Francina is standing on the other side.

So all over downtown, from one block to the next you've got to climb a ladder — in your hoopskirts and corset and bustle that ain't no small thing even if you've got two good feet in your boots to stand on — and in our part of town that's thirty-two feet from down on the walk up to street level.

When the water table's high, the walks still flood out, of course. Bet you guessed that without me.

They filled up the streets at the top of town first, because the rich folk live there, Colonel Marsh who owns the lumber mill and Dyer Stone — that's Obadiah, but nobody call him that — who's the mayor, and such. And Skid Road they didn't fill in at all, because they needed it steep on account of the logs, so there's staircases up from it to the new streets, where the new streets are finished and sometimes where they ain't. The better neighborhoods got steam

lifts, too, all brass and shiny, so the rich ladies ain't got to show their bloomers to the whole world climbing ladders. Nobody cares if a soiled dove shows off her underthings, I guess, as long as the *underthings* are clean.

Up there some places the fill was only eight feet and they've got the new sidewalks finished over top of the old already. What they did there was use deck prisms meant for ships, green and blue from the glass factory up by the river as gives Rapid City its name, set in metal gratings so that when there's light the light can shine on down.

Down here we'll get wood plank, I expect, and like it. And then Madame Damnable will just keep those ruby lamps by the front door burning all the time.

The red light looks nice on the gilt, anyway.

Our business mostly ain't sailors but gold camp men coming or going to Anchorage, which is about the stupidest thing you ever could get to naming a harbor. I mean, why not just call it Harbor, like it was the only one ever? So we get late nights, sure, but our trade's more late afternoon to say two or four, more like a saloon than like those poor girls down under the docks who work all night, five dollar a poke, when the neap tide keeps the ships locked in. Which means most nights 'cept Fridays and Saturdays by 3:00 A.M. we're down in the dining room while Miss Bethel and Connie serves us supper. They're the barkeep and the cook. They don't work the parlor, but Connie feeds us better than we'd get at home and Miss Bethel, she keeps a sharp eye on the patrons.

Sundays, we close down for the Sabbath and such girls as like can get their churching in.

So I don't remember which day it was exactly that Merry Lee and Priya came staggering into the parlor a little before three in the morning, but I can tell you it wasn't a Friday or Saturday, because all the punters had gone home except one who'd paid Pollywog for an all-night alteration session and was up in the Chinese Room with her getting his seams ripped, if you take my meaning. The Professor — he plays the piano in the parlor for Effie and Pollywog and Beatrice to sing to — had gone home for the night already, it was that slow. The rest of us — just the girls and Crispin, not Madame Damnable — were in our robes and slippers, faces scrubbed and hair down, sitting in the library when it happened. We don't use the parlor except for working.

Beatrice, who's the only one at the hotel younger than me, was practicing reading out loud to the rest of us, her slim, dark fingers bent back holding the big ivory-bound book of Grimm's fairy tales. She's a tiny bit of a thing, is Bea, and has all the manners I don't. Her mother was a courtesan — what they call a *placée* — down in New Orleans, and Bea speaks French better than English and has a long, straight nose, a good high forehead, and lips like a bee-stung rose.

We'd just settled in with after-dinner tea and biscuits when there was a crash down the ladder out front and the sound of somebody crying like her leg was broke. Given the loudness of the thump, I reckoned that might not be too far from the truth of it.

Crispin and Miss Francina gave each other The Look, and while Beatrice put the ribbon in her book they both got up and moved toward the front door. Crispin I already said about, and the thing about Miss Francina is that Miss Francina's got a pecker under her dress. But that ain't nothing but God's rude joke. She's one of us girls every way that matters, and handy for a bouncer besides.

I followed along just behind them, and so did Effie. We're the sturdiest girls, and Effie can shoot well enough that Madame Damnable lets her keep a gun in her room. Miss Bethel hides a pump shotgun under the bar, too, but she was upstairs in bed already, so while Crispin was unlocking the door I went over and got it, working the breech to make sure it was loaded. Beatrice grabbed Signor, the deaf white cat who lives in the parlor — he's got one blue eye and one yellow and he's loud as an Ozark howler when he wants something — and pulled him back into the library with the rest of the girls.

When I got up behind Crispin, it was all silence outside except the patting of the rain dripping down into the well and splashing in the puddles. Not even any more crying, though we all stood with our ears straining. Crispin pulled open the door and Miss Francina went striding out into that burning cold in her negligee and marabou slippers like she owned the night and the rest of us was just paying rent on it. I skin-flinched, just from nerves, but it was all right because I'd had the sense to keep my finger off the shotgun trigger.

And then Miss Francina said, "Sweet child Christ!" in that breathy voice of hers and Crispin was through the door with his truncheon, the bald center of his pate shining in the red lantern

light. I heard him curse, too, but it sounded worried rather than angry or fearful, so I let the shotgun muzzle droop and walked up to the doorway just in time to grab the arm of a pretty little Indian girl — Eastern Indian, not American Indian — who was half-naked and in hysterics. Her clothes had never been good, or warm enough for the night, though somewhere she'd gotten some lace-up boots and a man's coat too big for her, and now they was wet through and shredded. All she had on else was a ripped-up shift all stained across the bosom, and I could tell she weren't wearing nothing under it.

She was turned around, tugging something — another girl's arm, poking out frontward between Crispin and Miss Francina where they were half-dragging her. She had a fine hand, which was all I could see of her, and the rain dripped pink off her sallow fingers. Once they got both girls inside in the light, Effie lunged forward and slammed the door. I handed her the shotgun and went to see to the girls.

"Here, Karen," Crispin said in his big slow-molasses voice. "You take this little one. Bring her after. I'll get Miss Merry here upstairs to the sickroom."

Miss Francina stepped back and I could see that the girl between them was somebody I knowed, at least by reputation. Not a girl, really. A woman, a Chinese woman.

"Aw, shit," Effie said. Not only can she shoot, but Effie's not real well-spoken. "That's Merry Lee."

Merry Lee, which was as close as most American tongues could get to her real name, I guess, was half-conscious and half-fighting, batting at Crispin's hands while he swung her up into his arms. Miss Francina stuck her own hands in there to try to hold her still, where they looked very white against all the red on Merry Lee's face and arms.

Effie said, "She's gun shot. I guess all that running around busting out Chinatown crib whores finally done caught up with her. You knowed it was sooner or later going to."

"You hush about things you know nothing about," Miss Francina said, so Effie drew back, chastened like, and said, "I didn't mean nothing by it."

"Go and watch the door, Effie," Miss Francina said. Effie hefted that shotgun and did, not sulking at all. Effie talks without thinking sometimes, but she's a good girl. Madame Damnable don't tolerate

them what ain't.

The girl in my arms was as cold skinned as she was slick with rain, and all she wanted was to twist loose of me. She pulled away once and threw herself at Crispin, but Miss Francina caught her and gave her back, and honest, she was mostly too light and skinny to put up a good fight once I had a grip on her. I tried to talk to her, tell her she was safe and we were going to take care of her and Merry Lee both. I could hear her teeth chatter when I got close. I didn't think then she understood a word of it, but I found out later her English was better'n mine, so I think it was mostly that she couldn't hardly of been more upset. But something got through to her, because after a minute of twisting her wrists and getting blood all over my good pink flannel she stood still, shivering and dripping, her long face sad as a wet filly's. She let me bundle her up the stairs after Crispin and Merry Lee while Miss Francina went to fetch Miss Lizzie.

We followed them down the long rose-painted hall to the sickroom door. Crispin wanted to take Merry Lee in without the Indian girl, but the girl weren't having none of it. She leaned against my arms and keened through the doorway, and finally Crispin just looked at me helplessly and said, "Karen honey, you better bring that child in here before she cries down the roof."

She was better inside, sitting in a chair beside the bed with wool blankets wrapped around her, though it were another fight to get her to cut loose of that soaking old coat. She leaned forward — again I thought *filly,* starved and leaning on her plow collar — while Crispin checked over Merry Lee for where she was hurt worst. Effie was right about her being gun shot, too — she had a graze through her long black hair showing bone, and that was where most of the blood was from, but there was a bullet in her back, too, and Crispin couldn't tell from looking if it had gone through to a lung. It weren't in the spine, he said, or she wouldn't of been walking.

Just as he was stoking up the surgery machine — it hissed and clanked like a steam engine, which was never too reassuring when you just needed a boil lanced or something — Miss Lizzie came barreling up the stairs with an armload of towels and a bottle of clear corn liquor. She must of had her arm off for sleeping, because it was bundled up with the linens, but when she strapped it over her stump and started to turn the crank to wind up the spring I knowed it was time for me to be leaving. Miss Lizzie's narrow and

sharp as one of her scalpels, and nothing shakes her: not even lockjaw, which is the scariest thing I can think of, just about, 'cepting maybe the hydrophobia. The girl weren't going nowhere, but she didn't look like interfering anymore — she just leaned forward moaning in her throat like a hurt kitten, both hands clenched on the blankets over the cane arms of the bedside chair.

Crispin could handle her if she did anything. And he could hold down Merry Lee if she woke up that much.

I slipped through the door while Miss Lizzie was cutting the dress off Merry Lee's back. I'd seen her and that machine pull a bullet before, and I didn't feel like puking.

I got downstairs just as somebody started trying to kick in the front doors.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She is the author of over twenty novels and a hundred short stories, the most recent of which is *Steles of the Sky*. She is a Sturgeon, Campbell, and multiple Hugo Award winner, a rock climber, and a very bad guitarist. She divides her time between central Massachusetts, where her Giant Ridiculous Dog lives, and western Wisconsin, where her partner, fantasist Scott Lynch, lives.

Ace Books Presents
Gemini Cell
(novel excerpt)

Myke Cole

A high shriek came to him from a few feet away. “Daddy!”

Schweitzer allowed his focus to crack, his eyes to come off the gun sights and toward the sound.

Patrick stood awake in the doorway to his room, his footed pajamas showered with dust, his blond hair a tousled mess, his face pink and eyes shining with tears. “Daddy!” he shrieked again.

As one man, the enemy turned toward him.

Schweitzer’s heart leapt into this throat. “Patrick! No! Get back in . . .”

The stuttering salvo resumed. The muzzles of the enemy guns flashing. Patrick flew back from the doorway, snatched by an invisible hand. A streak of blood traced the floor, an arrow pointing the way he had gone. The door to his room danced, ripped off its hinges and spinning in the air, blotting out Schweitzer’s view of his son.

And then the door covered Patrick, burning, rocking on its edges. His son screamed no more.

Schweitzer screamed for him. His vision swam. The pain of his wounds vanished. He leapt to his feet, shrugging off the wreckage of the stairway, sliding on the floor slick with his own blood. *He’s okay,* his mind told him. *If you can get to him fast enough, you can save him.*

A part of him knew it couldn’t be true, that no four-year-old could survive that many rounds. He silenced that part. Another part came alive.

That other part propelled him to the burning door over his son, firing madly, all attempt at accuracy forgotten. He snarled, the world disappearing. The room, the smoke, the enemy, all gone. Nothing existed other then the red tunnel that encompassed the ground Schweitzer had to cover to reach Patrick’s side.

He ran as if through molasses, Patrick's door growing no closer. Something struck him in his side, his shoulder. He stumbled, sank, kept going. *He'll be okay. You've still got time for CPR.*

He heard a shriek and allowed himself a look over his shoulder.

The balcony to their loft bedroom sat above the staircase, offering Sarah a clear view of Patrick's doorway. She called her son's name, leaping out over the ragged hole left by the now-burning ruin of the staircase. The guns moved toward the ceiling, spitting rounds into the recessed-can lights, showering all with plaster dust, sparks and shattered glass. Sarah plummeted, slamming into one of the enemy. Something bright and metal flashed in her hand. Schweitzer blinked and realized it was the tiny, hook-bladed knife she used to cut canvas. The lacquered wooden handle was probably two inches long, the blade scarcely longer.

A mother wolf, she bore the man to the floor, plunging the flimsy blade into his neck above the collar of his body armor, covering herself with a bright spray of arterial blood. *Oh, baby. I knew you wouldn't stay still.*

The man writhed away from her, his finger clamped on the trigger, the gun uselessly spitting rounds into the ceiling. Sarah screamed and stabbed him again and again. He shuddered beneath her.

Her target dispatched, she looked up, eyes lighting on Patrick's door, not seeing Schweitzer before it. She got to her feet, began to run for her son.

A bullet slammed into her, lifting her into the air, throwing her back into the ruins of the staircase. She spun in the air, twitching, eyes narrowing in shock and agony. Blood misted the air as Sarah disappeared, vanishing into the burning splinters, her body limp.

For the first time in his life, Schweitzer was frozen in the midst of battle. The corpse of his wife before him. The corpse of his child behind him. Which way to turn. No way. There was no way. *They're not okay. They're not okay. They're not okay.*

The image of the refrigerated container of corpses flashed in his mind, but this time Patrick and Sarah's still, blue-lipped bodies lay on the steel racks. *A lot of corpses in one day, huh?*

More hammerblows, this time in his gut. Schweitzer took a few steps backward, tried to hitch a breath, couldn't.

The red tunnel turned gray, narrowed. He couldn't see Sarah. He tried to turn to Patrick's door. Couldn't move.

He looked down.

His chest was smeared with blood, the skin blistered, dotted with splinters.

Below it, he could make out the jagged yellow-white protrusion of his sternum, hovering over the gap that had once been his abdomen.

The curve of his rib cage held the ribbons of his abdominal muscles, hanging in flaps over the dark recesses of his gut, laid open by what must have been a considerable volume of fire. Long gray-blue ropes had uncoiled from inside, draping down to his knees. He watched, numb, as they slid farther. *Sarah? Sarah? I'm hurt.* His mouth worked. He felt something warm and sticky sliding down the corner.

The tunnel narrowed farther, his vision blurring, the edges of what little he could see going indistinct. He didn't have time for this, he had to get to Patrick, but he couldn't move.

One of the enemy stepped into his field of vision. He was still spattered with his comrade's brains, the last of the original four who'd come in. He stepped close to Schweitzer, intimately close, eyes slits of rage. Schweitzer could smell the sour stink of his breath through his balaclava. He was a coffee drinker. Smoker, too.

"We knocked on the right door, asshole," the man said.

Schweitzer could feel the cold firmness of a gun barrel shoved underneath his chin. He tried to punch the man, smack the gun down. Fight. Anything. He couldn't move.

Sarah.

Bang.

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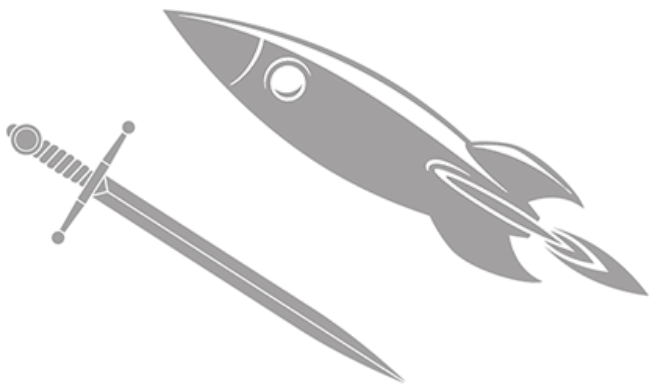
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myke Cole is the author of the military fantasy Shadow Ops trilogy *(Control Point, Fortress Frontier, Breach Zone). Gemini Cell* is set in the Shadow Ops universe, but stands alone. As a security contractor, government civilian and military officer, Myke Cole's career has run the gamut from counterterrorism to cyber warfare to federal law enforcement. He's done three tours in Iraq and was recalled to serve during the

Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

NONFICTION



Feature Interview: Ann Leckie

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy

Ann Leckie is the author of *Ancillary Justice,* one of last year's most popular books. It won numerous awards, including the Hugo, the Nebula, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the British Science Fiction Association Award. A sequel, *Ancillary Sword,* is out now.

This interview first appeared on Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, which is hosted by David Barr Kirtley. Visit geeksguideshow.com to listen to the entire interview and the rest of the show, in which the host and his guests discuss various geeky topics.

To start out with, how did you first get interested in reading fantasy and science fiction?

I honestly do not know the answer to that question. I've been reading fantasy and science fiction since I was pretty little, so it's one of those things that has always been there. I'm not sure how I got interested in it.

I heard you say that your parents were not big science fiction fans?

They were not. They were big mystery novel fans, but they were not into science fiction. They felt like science fiction was just about gadgets and stuff, and couldn't really be real literature. They really hoped I would grow out of it.

So it wasn't around the house, I assume, but somehow you found it in a library or school or something?

Probably in the library. I lived walking distance from the local library branch when I was a kid and would go down there almost

every Saturday and just hang. That's probably where I found it.

What were some of the authors that you were reading at that time?

I've read almost everything that was on the shelves there, but that was when I discovered Andre Norton. Big favorite of mine for a very long time. I read a bunch of John Christopher, I remember. There were just tons of things. In a lot of cases, I wouldn't remember who it was, but Andre Norton was a definite big one.

Were you writing any science fiction as a kid, or when did you actually start writing your own science fiction?

I did write stuff as a kid, and I think most of it I've sort of repressed. There was some fantasy and science fiction, but also parodies. The kind of stuff that you write when you're a kid — stuff to amuse my friends at school, particularly in high school. I'm not a hundred percent sure, to be honest, but I was writing stuff. I did think it would be cool to be a writer, and interestingly, although my parents did not approve of my reading choices, they firmly believed that I was going to be a writer and really encouraged me to do that.

What kind of encouragement did they give you? I know you went to the Clarion Writers' Workshop. How did you go from reading stuff as a kid or teenager to attending Clarion?

That was a long process because I was at Clarion West in 2005, so that was pretty recent. What happened was, as a kid and particularly in high school and college, I thought, "Gee, wouldn't it be cool to write, but I don't have any really good ideas." I'd sit down and write something, and it would just seem stupid. I didn't realize at the time — and I think this is one of the big blessings of the internet — that a lot of people feel that way. Even some of my favorite writers feel that way when they sit down to write something. At the time, I felt like it was a sign that really I wasn't as talented as, say, my parents kept telling me they thought I was, and it was, "No, obviously, I can't do this, because if I could do this, I

could just sit down and do it."

So that persisted for a long time, and then when I had my kids, I was at home. I had discovered very quickly that if I went back to work, I would be spending money to work, which is defeating the purpose of doing it when it's a job that you don't really love. I stayed home, and my kids are wonderful. I think any parent will tell you their kids are wonderful, and it's really marvelous to be able to spend a lot of time with them when they're little, but it's not very intellectually stimulating. After a while, I stared to feel like my brains were leaking out my ears.

That was when I said, "I have to do something." We finally got an internet connection, and I started reading up on just stuff. I said, "No, wait a minute. Actually, all these other writers feel that way when they sit down to do it, and so maybe that's not a sign that I can't be a writer. Maybe I can't, but *that's* not a sign that I can't. Maybe that'd be something to do, something to think about that would be helpful to me psychologically." That was when I seriously sat down and said, "No, I'm going to do this even if I feel like it's stupid."

NaNoWriMo was a really big help there too. I love NaNoWriMo. One of the things I learned was, even with that little voice in the back of my mind telling me that my ideas just weren't worth it and nobody would want to read them, I could still write through that. I can continue. And when the month was done, I had a manuscript that was an important step in my beginning to feel confident as a writer. It wasn't long after that that some friends in a crit group said, "You know, you really ought to apply to Clarion or Clarion West." I thought about it, and I worked it all out and said, "I can make it work out." I did apply and I went. That was pretty cool.

Was that NaNoWriMo novel *Ancillary Justice?*

It was not. I already had the basic plot for *Ancillary Justice,* but I was afraid to write it because I knew that I wanted it to be first person from that character's perspective, but the idea of writing that, I couldn't even figure out how to begin to write that character. How do you write from the first person perspective of somebody with thousands of bodies? It's like, "I can't do that." Actually, that first NaNo novel is over to the side of *Ancillary Justice.*

It's in the same continuity though?

It is in the same continuity, yeah. In fact, it deals with events that are mentioned in *Ancillary Justice* and are actually dealt with specifically in that first NaNo novel.

I know that you wrote a bunch of short stories before your first novel came out. Where in the chronology were you doing the short stories?

It was in 2002 that I did my first NaNoWriMo, and then I did another year of NaNoWriMo. When I looked at those two manuscripts, I said, "You know, maybe I need to start writing some short stories," partly because that's the advice that they often give you, which is if you know you want to sell a novel, you should sell some short stories first. I want to say that is not necessarily true, and if you really don't like short stories, there's no reason to spend a lot of time trying to write them because you'll just make yourself unhappy. You won't necessarily make any readers happy, so I just want to put that out there. But at the time, I thought, "Well maybe I should do that." Also, it takes a very long time to write a novel and then it can be on submission for ages. A short story? It takes much less time. The turnaround's faster. You get rejected a lot faster. So I said, "Well, I'll spend some time on short stories," and I had only written a few short stories when I went to Clarion West (enough to apply). Of course, I spent that time writing short stories. Then I spent a fair amount of time after that putting a lot of work into writing short stories, which I enjoyed a lot, actually. There's some really neat stuff you can do at that scale. It's a very different form, which is part of why I don't think it's necessarily helpful to tell aspiring novelists that they should learn to write short stories if they want to learn to write novels, because that's not what they're going to learn. Although you can learn some cool stuff that way, I think.

Tell us a bit more about Clarion. It says in your Wikipedia page that you studied with Octavia Butler. Could you tell us a little bit about what sort of interactions you had with her while you were there?

She was our Week One teacher, Octavia Butler. She was awesome, of course. She was also very, very introverted, and so we would interact in class. One of the cool things about Clarion, probably with Clarion San Diego as well, is you get that one-on-one session with the instructor that week. It was awesome to be able to talk to her personally. She'd only seen my submission story. She'd chosen my submission story for the first week so that I didn't have to write a story that first week, so she was only really looking at that work. She looked at that story in our one-on-one, and she said, "So you're not really under the impression that this is a short story, are you?" and I said no. She says, "Because you're really a novelist, right?" and I said, "Yeah, I kind of am." That was really cool; that was amazing. It was amazing to be able to meet her and hear her talk about fiction. It was fabulous.

Then you had a bunch of short stories you had written. What was your process for selling some of those to get your first fiction publications?

The first science fiction publication I actually wrote at Clarion West. Just before I went to Clarion West, John Scalzi had said on his blog that he was going to be guest editing an issue of *Subterranean Magazine* and that the theme was going to be science fiction clichés. I said, "Well, that would be really cool," and went into Clarion West and actually told some of my classmates about it too. I ended up turning in a first draft of a story for Week Six with Michael Swanwick, in fact, that I actually ended up then revising and selling to John Scalzi for that issue. That was my first sale.

What was the cliché?

The cliché was kind of an Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiche. It was called "Hesperia and Glory," and it was very much a Martian prince thing, very much like the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars things.

So you said that you're really a novelist by nature? Could you say a bit more about why the novel is the form you naturally fall into?

One of the things that I really enjoy (and I think a lot of readers and writers enjoy) about science fiction and fantasy is the way that you can really delve into the setting and the anthropology or the history or the geography or whatever. You can pull in a lot of really cool things and put them down on the page, and go, "Wow, isn't this cool?" But a short story doesn't really give you a lot of room for that. In a short story, absolutely everything has to be doing like five things, otherwise you have to cut it. The things that, in a novel, there's room to add a sentence to say this really cool thing that adds a really cool effect that's worth doing, there's just no space for in a short story. You have to be much more efficient, and that's one of the things that I really enjoy about writing.

I can do the short stories obviously, and they are fun to do, but I've found when I went back to doing the novels that it was almost a physical relief that I could stretch out and not have to slice off things that I really thought were important. When I would do a short story, I would write and it would be really long, and then I would have to keep cutting things off. I felt every now and then like, you know, Cinderella's stepsisters cutting their toes off to fit their feet in the shoe? I felt like that sometimes. I'm a lot more comfortable when I have a lot of elbow room to work in.

I can definitely see that with *Ancillary Justice,* because the world you present in this novel is just so full of different ideas and all these different things all stuck together. Why don't you tell us a bit about the world of that novel and tell us a little about, say, the Radch Empire?

Essentially its origin is actually a Dyson sphere, but in fact, the empire that's grown up around it has almost no contact with its original place of origin. It's just this huge expansive empire that's always moving outward and appropriating any systems that it comes across that have resources. They think of themselves as representing civilization and humanity, and they think of people who maybe don't match their definition of humanity as being not entirely human and not worth paying much attention to, but they really see themselves as being a force for good and for civilization. They're bringing light to the world, which the people who get annexed would argue with. So that's the basic set-up of it, and of

course, they use the warships that essentially take prisoners from these annexations and slave them to the ship's A.I.s and use those as soldiers, as cannon fodder, as servants to work for the armies. That's basically what the set-up is.

Historically, what were some of the inspirations for the Radch Empire? What bits and pieces did you take from different real life events?

It's mostly bits and pieces, and it isn't necessarily inspired in particular by any set of historic events or historic empires — although once I got started, I went looking for real life empires. The most prominent example in Western history would be Rome. Of course, a lot of science fiction writers have used the Roman Empire more or less simplistically, sometimes more complicatedly. Rome, in a lot of ways, was a big influence. But I drew from different historical periods and different areas, generally anything that interested me. I would be fascinated for a while with the ancient Near East, and I would grab things from there. Or I would be fascinated with Egypt and grab stuff from there. A number of people have remarked, and I've said it before in the past, too, Rome has been a big influence.

How about the centrality of tea to the Radch Empire? Where did that idea come from?

Initially, it came from the fact that I am a huge, huge fan of C.J. Cherryh's Foreigner books. Tea, although I don't think it really is the same kind of thing we call tea, is really important to the Atevi in the Foreigner books, and I had just come off a time when I was reading and rereading the first several books of those when I started into the first NaNoWriMo novel. Also, I like tea, and so I said, "Well, that's a win, right? That's a cool thing about these novels that I can use and it's a thing that I like. I'll plug it in there and see what happens." I plugged it in there and it just became really important. I was like, "Okay, I'll run with that."

It's interesting you mention C.J. Cherryh, because this copy

has a blurb from Elizabeth Bear who says that this book "establishes Leckie as an heir to Banks and Cherryh." This reminded me a lot of Iain Banks and also Lois McMaster Bujold. Would you say that those were influences on you?

I hear the Banks thing a lot and I guess I can see where people are coming from. I had read *Consider Phlebas* at some point, quite some time ago. Other than that, I had not read a lot of Banks. After *Ancillary Justice* came out, then I read *The Hydrogen Sonata,* and that is all the Banks that I've read, so he wasn't a big influence on my work. I can see where folks are coming from with the sentient ship angle, although I think his project was a little bit different. Bujold is somebody who may have been an influence — I think I've read all the Miles Vorkosigan books — but if so, it wasn't a conscious one. I'm definitely much more familiar with her work than with Banks.

Speaking of the sentient ships, when I think of sentient ships in science fiction, the first example that comes to mind for me is *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey. I don't know if that was an influence on you, but I thought it was interesting because you have a female sentient ship, or at least I took it as a female sentient ship, in *Ancillary Justice* who likes to sing. I don't know if there is any connection there, but it made me think of that: *The Ship Who Sang.*

I have actually never read *The Ship Who Sang.* I ordered a copy recently. I found a used copy because I was like, "Maybe I should read it at this point." One of the reasons *Justice of Toren* sings is because I was thinking about the character. I was thinking, "Well, if I had that many bodies, what would I do?" Almost the first thing that came to my mind was "Holy cow, I could sing choral music all by myself!" That would be completely awesome. Once having had that idea, even just the title of *The Ship Who Sang* is so famous that it's hard to escape that being there in the background. It wasn't something that I had ever read. One of these days I'll read it.

In an interview, I saw that you said that music is often handled badly in fiction so you resisted putting that in for a while. Could you talk about why you think music is handled badly in

fiction a lot of the time?

There are at least two main reasons. One of them is it can be fetishized in a way that I don't really enjoy. I think a lot of times, our culture has an attitude towards art and the production of art that separates artists from the rest of us. Like making art, music, painting, or whatever as some magical thing that you have to be inspired to do and special people do it. Sometimes when somebody will write a character who's musical, there will be touches of that. They'll be that almost Mary Sue-ish — they play and sing beautifully, and all the animals stop and listen. I'm exaggerating, but that kind of fetishization of music and musical talent and singing, I'm not comfortable with. This is not necessarily because there's a problem with that, but because I feel very strongly that art, and music in particular, is something that really everybody has some kind of ability to do. When you separate that out as something only special people can do, people who are specially talented, you cut off that avenue of artistic expression for tons of people who would otherwise be able to enjoy it but who think of it as something they can't do. I feel strongly about that.

The other way that I find that music is often handled badly in fiction is when the writer is thinking of the music as a soundtrack and wants it there. They'll put in the lyrics to the song, for instance, expecting it to have the same effect as a soundtrack — except it doesn't work that way. When you're reading the lyrics flat on the page, it doesn't evoke the music in the same way that the music actually does. Even worse in my opinion: when there are made-up songs. I even stepped into this. When there are made-up songs and they want to evoke a particular mood or a particular emotional response with the made-up song, but of course it can't, because it's not an existing song. The writer may feel it for what they're writing down, but the reader doesn't have the context that lets them do that. Those are the most common ways that I personally find music to be not particularly well handled when it's used in fiction.

Let's talk a little bit more about Breq, the character. You mention she's kind of this starship, where the starship and the crew are networked together so it's this group mind, and you said that you were hesitant to do the book at first because that

seemed like a really ambitious project. How did you work through that reluctance and actually write the book? What sort of approaches did you take to that?

Essentially, I came back from Clarion West, which — that's come up several times at this point. That was actually a very pivotal six weeks for me. One of the things about being at something like Clarion West is you spend all this time with people who take you really seriously. They don't know you as the lunch lady or the person down the street who's just a regular person who couldn't possibly be a writer or whatever. They are there meeting other writers, and they take your work really seriously. It's much easier coming away from that to say, "All right, I am a writer. I actually can do this, I just spent all this time with all this support and all these people taking it seriously and talking to me as though of course I'm a writer." So I came away from that a lot more confident, not necessarily about my abilities, but about my being able to try to be a writer. That's an odd way of putting it.

When November came around that year, which would have been the next NaNoWriMo, I said, "Well, maybe what I need to do is just stop doubting myself and hold my nose and jump. Just start writing." I did, and it was horrendous. I made all kinds of horrible structural things, but I said, "I'm just going to write and write and come up with something." After having thought about it for a while — well, how do I do this; this is really complicated; I could come up with a lot of complicated ways to do it — and I said, "No, the way to do it, since this is the only way I can see that I can do it, is to actually do it very simply and just make sure that I ground the setting really firmly so that every time there's a switch to a different body, I'm very specific about 'in this place, this is happening' and 'in this place, this is happening' and making sure that the information is very clear and right up front. Just try and pace it so that it's working, which is a thing you do by feel." That was what I did, although that was a lot of work. That took a lot of trial and error, a lot of backing up, and a lot of banging my head on the desk. In the end, I decided to take a very straightforward approach to it.

One of the things I really like about Breq as a character is how she's not human and so she has to really try hard to pretend to

be human, and smile when she thinks people would be expecting her to smile, and so on. Doing this podcast, a lot of people complain that my voice is too monotone or that I'm not enthusiastic enough, so I really identified with Breq in that sense, because I have to try to pretend to be more animated for this podcast. Is that something that you yourself have experienced, knowing people want you to be more animated, or are you just using your imagination to picture what this robotic kind of character would be like?

I absolutely experience that. You bet. Like a lot of writers, I'm a serious introvert and talking to strangers, going out into a place, like the grocery store, and talking to somebody I don't know is very difficult. Actually my very first job was as a busgirl, but in college, I got a job as a waitress. In a lot of ways, it was not a fun job. But in a lot of ways, it was beneficial, because where I wasn't sure how those interactions were supposed to go with people I didn't know well, but working for several years as a waitress, you learn really quickly a couple of default scripts. You know exactly what the interaction is going to be when the person sits down at the table, and after a few months of that, I'm like, "Oh, I can switch it up a little bit. I can say 'Hey, it's pretty rainy outside,'" and get a particular response and know how to respond to that. That was a big learning thing for me when I was in high school and college. That's something that I found very useful. What it means is that I'm not a person who those kind of interactions come naturally to me, so when I'm thinking about Breq, I'm thinking about my own experience of here I am talking to a person, now I need to pick a script, how is this going to go?

That's really interesting. Maybe I should get a job as a waiter. It might help me with my podcast.

I found it beneficial. There are some cool things about waiting tables. You meet a lot of really interesting people, and most people who come into a place and eat are cool and fine. There are one or two who just make you despair for humanity, and then there are a few who are just a joy. It is really neat to be exposed to all those people, and it's really neat to be able to have them have a nice time and you help them have a nice time. At the same time, there's a

reason that I haven't gone out and gotten another table-waiting job even though my kids are back in school.

That's interesting, because I saw in your bio that you worked as a waitress, and there's such a focus in both these books, it seems to me, on social status and "is this person above me or below me in the social status, and what do I have to say to them to be polite?" I was wondering if that kind of stuff came out of your experiences doing jobs like waitressing?

It may well have. There's nothing for showing you what people think their status is than being in a position like a waitress or a busgirl. After I had been waiting tables for the first few years — and I discovered that this is not original to me, other people have had this thought — I came to the conclusion that you could tell a lot about a person by how they treated someone they thought had no power over them. Very frequently, that someone is a waiter or a dishwasher or a garbage collector. It's interesting. I actually worked in the faculty club of the university where I went to school, and so it was extraordinarily interesting to see the way that members, some of whom were professors, some of whom were big donors of the university, to see the way they would treat the other people who they would come into lunch with or the other people that they would encounter in the building versus the way they would speak to the waiters. It was interesting to me. I don't think it consciously played in to the books, but at the same time, I can't imagine that that experience wasn't there in the background.

Speaking of how people speak, one thing I thought that these books do really well is that it constantly reminds you that these characters are speaking a language other than English, and it's constantly saying she used a word that could mean this or that or in this particular language, this word meant that. And also, I don't think you ever say the character nodded or shrugged or something like that. It's always, "She made a gesture indicating confusion" or a gesture indicating something.

I hope I didn't. I tried very hard to stay away from shrugging and

nodding for exactly that reason.

It's really well thought through, the alien nature of the society and the manners.

That's something that I think a lot of science fiction tries really hard to convey: sort of an alien, different future society. It's one of the things I love about science fiction. But at least in the past several years, I've become really interested in the things that writers, including myself, don't notice because they assume that it's default. So the shrugging and the nodding is one of those things. I think in my very first draft, people were shrugging and nodding left and right. I realized at one point that these gestures are very culture specific, and if you're making a completely alien society, there's no reason they're going to shrug. There's no reason that a nod is going to mean what it means to us. They are going to have a completely different vocabulary of bodily movement that's going to communicate the same way ours does, but it's not going to be shrugs and nods. That was a revelatory thought for me. It had not occurred to me, but it's really made me notice. It's more easily noticeable in older science fiction where we've got this future society, and the technology is all very different, but people are smoking cigarettes and using slide rules. The social relationships are exactly like they would have been in the fifties. The wife is bringing in coffee. It's like those are blind spots because the writer saw those things as being constant. Why would those change because those are completely human nature — smoking a cigarette and having your wife bring you a coffee. I don't mean that to be critical in any particular way of any particular writer. I think we've all got those blind spots, and I find it fascinating to look and see where they turn up in the places that I can see them. I'm sure there are tons of them that I can't see because they're my own blind spots.

Speaking of the wife bringing in coffee, of course, that brings us to another really striking aspect of the book, which is that the Radchaai society doesn't think gender is all that important, and the Radchaai language makes no distinction the way English does between male and female people. Why don't you talk a little bit about that and how you chose to communicate

that in the book?

I had wanted to, as you said, create a society that genuinely did not care about gender. But what I found was, writing in English, using he and she for everybody, I couldn't escape my own associations with that. It wasn't giving the impression of a society that didn't care about gender. It was inadequate to me. I thought about various ways to do what I was trying to do. At one point, I wrote a short story where everybody was "he" and I was really unhappy with it. Then I said, "What if I just said 'she' for everybody?" You wouldn't end up with a society that truly seemed gender neutral because "she" is not gender neutral. You would end up with the impression of a society that was completely populated by women, but on the other hand, while it's fairly common to read books that seem like they're completely populated by men except for the wives bringing in the coffee, it's not quite as common to run across that where it's all women. Also, just noticing that it was all women, I found it sort of undercut that assumption of masculine default in a way that just using "he" wouldn't have worked, and in a way that I personally felt using one of the various proposed gender neutral pronouns wouldn't have had quite as large an impact, although it would have had some interesting effects. Actually, I think it would be cool if people would use those more often.

So that was what I ended up doing — I ended up calling everyone "she," and then I said to myself, "But if the main character's talking to somebody else in a language that isn't Radchaai, now I've got another problem." That ended up with the things that happened in the beginning of the novel, which is where Breq is talking to people who do speak languages that use genders, and she's not used to making that assignment. She messes up sometimes, but her internal monologue is all using the pronoun that she's used to as though I'm translating always with "she" for the Radchaai pronoun.

As it happens, actually there are a number of real life Earth languages that don't gender people. Hungarian doesn't. I believe Finnish doesn't. There are quite a few of them, but actually that doesn't end up with a society that doesn't care about gender. I had to add another layer to it. One of the things I think is interesting is that — and I found this out after I wrote the book — people whose

first languages are those languages like Hungarian or Chinese that don't gender people, when they're speaking say, English, they very frequently misgender not because they don't know the difference but because they're not used to grabbing the right one automatically, which is something that we have a lot of practice at. It's part of our mental furniture. If I understand correctly, and I may be wrong about this, but in spoken Chinese, there's not a distinction, but there is a distinction in written Chinese. I say Chinese, but there's a bunch of different languages. This tells you how little I know about that particular group of languages. I found that very interesting. That's something that, even when gender is something that's important to you, it's actually not easy to do unless you've had a lot of practice.

Is there any association at all between whether you grew up with one of those languages and how you view gender?

I don't know of any studies, but I'm not sure it's particularly different. I don't think I've ever heard that, say, in Finland or Hungary, attitudes towards gender are radically different, although they *may* be different. Once again, I'm stepping into an area where I know very little about Hungary, Finland, or China, so I couldn't tell you, but I haven't seen any. I know I've seen studies that have been disputed about other languages that gender nouns. Supposedly, people have different attitudes towards objects depending on the gender in their language, but that's been disputed as maybe not being a necessarily useful study. I haven't heard anything about people having different attitudes towards gender if their language doesn't gender people.

It does sort of seem to me that it might be a good thing if we tried to move toward a less gendered language, because it seems like when English makes such a big distinction, it emphasizes this idea that gender is this really important thing that you have to keep in mind one hundred percent of the time, and also that there are only two genders, and everyone falls into one or the other.

Exactly. It's very hard to talk about somebody without calling

out their gender — at least, the gender that culture has assigned to them. As you point out, the idea that there are only two is not necessarily the case. When you're used to only speaking one language or maybe a couple of languages that tend to do the same kinds of things — maybe you speak a few Indo-European languages; many of us learn some Spanish or some French — it's difficult to even look at the idea that maybe that assignment of gender isn't something that arises naturally out of the world but is an artifact of the language. Sometimes that can be a weird thought for folks who haven't thought of it that way. I think there are some things that certain things about the language makes it hard to talk about, and that's one of them. That the way that English is gendered with its pronouns makes it hard to talk about.

I heard you say that not all readers are perfectly clear when they start reading this book what's going on with the pronouns. What are some of the more interesting interpretations that people have had of it that isn't what you intended?

One of the few that I expected was the folks who would read right through and say, "Oh, well, this is a book entirely populated by women," and there have been several of those. A few people have gotten all the way to the end and gone to read a review or something, and said, "Wait, what? I didn't catch that." Another one that I did expect, but I expected more of it, were the folks who would read it and say, "Well, this is stupid. How could you not tell what gender somebody is? How could it not be important what gender somebody is? That's dumb." There is some of that. I've seen some of that, and readers have the reaction they're going to have. Once the book is out there, we read from a very personal place. We read from where we're at and what our history is, and who we are. I don't ever want to say that a reader's reaction to the work is not valid. But that, of course, was not what I was trying to convey.

This is a criticism that actually, in some ways, I've been glad to see — I've been surprised at the number of people who are really angry that I tried to convey gender neutrality by using a gendered pronoun. Even if it was "she," which undercuts a masculine default, they feel as though it would have been much better if I had used an

honest to goodness gender neutral pronoun, and that would have conveyed it better. People are also feeling kind of angry that the male characters in this story are persistently misgendered because they're continually referred to as she. I understand where that's coming from, and it certainly wasn't my intention to make people feel like anybody was being maliciously misgendered, and I, in some ways, share the frustration with folks about the third person neutral pronouns. I wish they were used more, as I said, and I totally understand where that's coming from. At the same time, I made the choice I did for the reasons I made it, and while I might have finessed some things a little bit differently, I think at the time, I was working very strongly from an assumption, maybe not an overt assumption. If you'd asked me, I wouldn't have said this, but the assumption's buried there, that in fact gender is a binary, and the implications of that do turn up in the text. I know some people have pointed it out, and they're right, it's there. Had I been writing it now, I probably would have handled those moments a little bit differently, but I think I would still have gone with "she" because I think it has a much stronger, more visceral effect. "She" is so much more familiar than the third-person neutral pronouns. That said, like I said, I really wish people would use them more so that they would become more familiar.

I saw you tweeted, "Oh, fan artists on Tumblr, I heart you."

Oh, I do!

It just made me curious because most of the characters in this book, you're not sure what gender they are. How have people gone about depicting them visually given that?

It's really interesting. The fan art that I've seen on Tumblr, which is all wonderful, the people will draw a character, and the character will look nothing like what I imagined the character. They're all very different from each other. It's clear that each of these artists who've done this have a very definite vision in their mind of what the characters look like, and they're all very different from each other. They're all very different from my internal vision of the characters, and yet, at the same time, they all work. They all feel

right. I think that's fabulous.

That was something I did not expect ever to see and that has been a really amazing experience to me to see how these fan artists do it. In some cases, they're drawing figures that are somewhat androgynous. In the case of Seivarden — who Breq knows to use a masculine pronoun for — the characters, the figures that they draw, tend to be sort of masculine, but they also tend to be maybe . . . feminized. There is one artist who loves to draw Seivarden with very long, tangled curly hair. It's really fabulous. I just love the fan art on Tumblr. I think it's wonderful.

Other than Seivarden, is there a statistical correlation between which characters readers think are male and which are female?

There isn't and I think it's really interesting. I've run across a couple of reviews where the reviewers were very clear that they have assigned genders to the characters. They seem to believe that there's evidence for it in the text. There was one review, it might have been a podcast, I'm not sure, where somebody was saying that they really liked using "she," but it would have seemed like a gimmick if everybody would have turned out to be gay, for instance, but no, the characters are straight who are involved in sexual relationships. I was like, "Really? How do they know that?" It became clear that the reviewer was thinking very much of Lieutenant Awn and Lieutenant Skaaiat, who of course are romantically and sexually involved. The reviewer had assigned genders to those characters. I thought that was really fascinating. And there was another case where a reviewer, in summarizing the plot, said of Lieutenant Awn — in the book, I say of Lieutenant Awn's family that her parents were cooks. That's all that's said about that. And this reviewer said, "Her father owned a restaurant and her mother was a cook." I thought that was interesting, how strongly that gendering is there and those expectations are there.

But I also have seen a few people say that they were really fascinated with that relationship in particular, that they began to question the assumptions they would assign as a reader, one or the other gender to the characters and then realize that maybe they'd assigned wrongly because, of course, they're both referred to as

“she.” There is nothing in the text to say what gender they would be or what the shape of their genitals would be, because that doesn’t matter. I’ve seen a few folks say, “Yeah, it’s interesting I assumed they were both women, or I assumed one was male and the other was female, but then I realized that if I switched it or changed that, my view of the relationship would change.” So for instance, one person thought of Skaaiat as male and Awn as female because of the power dynamic in that relationship, but if they imagined it the other way around, that changed the implied power dynamic because of our cultural assumptions. That discussion I found really fascinating. I’ve enjoyed seeing the way that different readers respond to that.

I did also want to talk to you about religion in *Ancillary Justice*. If I’m remembering this right, there was this line in the book where it talks about how these people saw living on a space station as the real world and descending to the planet surface was like a trip to hell and going further out into space was like ascending to the heavens. Could you talk about that idea?

A lot of times when we sort of make up different cultures, it’s really easy, and in fact, that’s a situation where I took an oversimplified idea of a real world cultural idea and said, “But if we were living in space, it would be different, right, because your environment has a lot to do with what’s important to you culturally.” There are quite a lot of religious systems that basically say, “Here’s the earth and then there’s heaven above, then there’s the underworld below.” I thought, “Well yeah, but if you had lived for thousands of years in space, that would be different. How would that be different? What would the implications of that be?” It was just kind of a throwaway because I thought it was cool to think about the idea of a space station being the natural habitat of human beings, and the Earth that we think of as being where you live and everything is good as being the underworld. Both just shifted out. What would that do? That would be fun.

It says in the books that the Radchaai consider monotheism almost inconceivable. Could you talk about why you decided to create a culture in which monotheism is so marginalized?

Because we live, at least in the U.S., in a very Christian-dominated culture and our idea of religion is strongly influenced by Christianity. There are a lot of different kinds of Christianity, but that base, exclusive monotheism, and that particular approach to it is considered sort of the default definition of religion. I wanted to get away from that, not because I think there's necessarily anything wrong with Christianity, but because I'm a science fiction reader. I like things to be different. I like to question that.

Of course, I went looking in history, which I do very frequently. One of the narratives that is common in our culture, for historical reasons, but that is massively oversimplified, is the Roman pagan relationship to Christianity and to Judaism. To a lot of ancient European pagans, they considered them — Christians in particular — to be atheists. If you think about it, if you're a polytheist, the idea that one god exists and the rest don't just doesn't make sense. Particularly if you're the sort of polytheist who, as has been the case for the majority of human religious history, if it's obvious to you that you have your gods in your place and if you go to someplace else, well, your gods are real, their gods are real. It's pretty obvious that your god of war is basically their god of war under a different name. That only makes sense. So it becomes really easy to accept a lot of different models for what god is. I think in the ancient world, the idea that there was one overarching god was pretty uncontroversial. At the same time, all the other gods were considered to be part of that, aspects of that, so the idea that our god exists and your gods don't exist was just weird and strange. It was tantamount to saying that God did not exist because that's as if you're saying, "Okay, God, yes, and all these other gods are part of God," and then these other people say, "No, your god doesn't exist," basically they're saying there are no gods. It's essentially a kind of atheism from that point of view. That was actually a real, historical situation. I was looking into Rome and I wanted to play with that. I wanted to get away from the exclusive monotheist default. I wanted to get away from preconceptions about what religion is, what faith is, and how it works. So I just flipped that and I looked at historical examples of exactly that kind of interface between a culture that's polytheistic and a culture that is exclusively monotheistic.

I saw you posted a message on Twitter where you said, "Might

be time for a new rant about the assumption that pre-Judeo Christian religions were mere shallow superstitions with no spiritual significance." I was wondering what, if anything in particular, prompted that or if you wanted to say a bit more about that?

A thing did prompt that. It was, in fact, a discussion of the book, but I don't want to point anybody to that particular discussion of the book, because, first of all, they don't deserve it, and secondly, it's a really common attitude. The idea expressed was that obviously we have evolved past that primitive polytheism, and whatever you thought of the various current religions, they were philosophically superior and spiritually superior to ancient Roman paganism, which was nothing but superstition. It was nothing but placating the gods because you were afraid and bribing them to give you things or whatever. That's a really common narrative and once again, it's a common part of the narrative of the history of Christianity that it was real religion that involved real spirituality and real faith, and that's why it has completely superseded these more pagan polytheistic practices.

Actually, that narrative has carried forward. I grew up Roman Catholic in a majority Roman Catholic city and it wasn't until I was about college age that I discovered some of the attitudes people who aren't Catholic have towards Roman Catholicism. That it's pagan superstition, which has been superseded by true religiousness, is also part of the narrative of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, superseding the horrible, superstitious, ignorant Roman Catholic Church. I'm not Catholic anymore, I'm an atheist, but I find that really offensive and hateful. If you look at anybody's religious beliefs and practices that aren't yours, they seem kind of shallow, they don't make sense, and they don't have any resonance, so it's hard to believe that they really find any real spiritual meaning in them. As I said, I grew up Roman Catholic. For instance, my first ventures into a Baptist church seemed really weird to me. I was like, "This can't really be religion, right, because where is all the stuff that says God? It's not there. It might as well be somebody's living room or something, right?" That would be doing the people who actually are sincere worshippers in that church a tremendous disservice.

But having that experience taught me that your own tradition

feels really rich and deep and resonant to you because you're immersed in that context, and outside of that context, you can't get that feeling because you don't have the context. You don't have the background. You don't have the strings that are going to sympathetically vibrate to whatever that frequency is. It's really easy to look back, particularly the way that in school we're taught about Greek and Roman paganism as though they're just these stories and that these stories explain why there's lightning or why there's such and such. Why there's winter and why there's spring, because otherwise they didn't understand it; they were just so ignorant. I think a lot of particularly ancient polytheistic religions worked very differently from the way that Christianity works. I do not think they were any less important to the people who lived those religions.

I have one other question on religion I want to ask you, and this is a pretty thorny theological conundrum, so it's okay if you can't answer it, but the question is: How is God like a duck?

Oh, I wish I knew. I honestly do not know. That's why it's such a thorny question in the book, right?

So this is a question that comes up in your sequel to *Ancillary Justice,* which is called *Ancillary Sword.* I want to talk about that a little bit more. *Ancillary Sword* is interesting because it's quite different from *Ancillary Justice. Ancillary Justice* seems more of an espionage thriller and *Ancillary Sword* feels to me more like a police procedural. What do you think about that and were you going for a different kind of vibe with the sequel?

I was definitely going for a different kind of vibe. On the one hand, I would love to give people more of the same who liked the book to begin with, but on the other hand, it would be kind of dull to write the same book a second time. Also, Breq's situation is very different. She's in the first book undergoing this huge tragedy and also looking for some kind of revenge or redress. In the second book, that's already been resolved to the extent that she could do it

and now her problems are a little bit subtler, a little bit different, and they're going to be superficially quieter, at least for a while. So that really did require a different sort of book.

One thing that really stuck me about *Ancillary Sword* is that it seems to resonate with a lot of contemporary events. There seems to be a lot of Occupy Wall Street and excessive force by the police kind of stuff in there. Were you consciously reacting to current events?

It's a coincidence how close the publication of this was to, for instance, events in Ferguson, which is not far from where I live, actually. I wasn't necessarily drawing on a particular set of events, but I think that background of the police using excessive force with particular populations is one that's there in the background. I wasn't necessarily trying to make a political statement, I think, with a lot of things, and occasionally I get asked this: Am I trying to make a political statement with the worldbuilding? And my answer is that I didn't set out to write a novel that was a political statement, but I also believe that we build stories — science fiction, far future, fabulous worlds — we build them out of our own world. The things that we pick to put into our built world do have political implications. They do say things about what we assume about the world. They do comment on the world that we live in, and so when I pick my things, then I try to look at them to see what it is I'm saying. I don't necessarily pick things to make a statement, but I pick things because I think they are realistic. They're things that really happen in the world. So when I want to make my world as real as possible, I'm putting those in there. There's an extent to which, yeah, the fact that those things do happen is part of why they're in the book, but they're not necessarily there because I'm trying to make a statement about it.

One line from *Ancillary Justice* that really struck me and that comes to the fore in *Ancillary Sword* is this line where somebody says, "Luxury always comes at someone else's expense." Is that something that you might be inclined to say yourself?

Probably. At least a certain kind of luxury. It's probably possible to set up a life that's very comfortable for everyone and not come at anyone's expense, but I think there's a certain kind of over-the-top luxury that is not possible to have for everybody, that somebody is always going to get stepped on.

I think a lot of science fiction fans would like to believe that technology is somehow going to free us from this sort of dynamic, since it used to be that taking a hot bath was something you only got to do if you were the king and now a much larger percent of the population can take hot baths. That's where I think this post-scarcity thing that you see in Iain M. Banks comes in. Do you have any opinion on whether technology might free us from this?

I go back and forth because, of course, your point about hot baths for instance is a very good and valid one. At the same time, how many people cannot take hot baths in Detroit right now even though that is default technology? You wouldn't think there was a building in the U.S. that did not have the capability to give its residents a hot bath, and yet, there they are. What's the reason for it? Because they don't have the money to pay for it.

So I think whenever you set up the situation where anything like that is something that is not a right but a luxury — because in that case, it's being treated as though it's a luxury that you have to be able to afford, even though for the vast majority of people in the country it's a considered a default thing that you can't really get along without — that in and of itself is interesting, the way it changes the framing when somebody isn't giving you the money you think you need. In science fictional terms, I don't know if it's possible. To some extent, my gut feeling is that you're always going to be in a situation where you can never get more energy out of a system than you put in. You're always going to get less out. Ultimately, it's difficult for me to believe that that's going to be any different when it comes to what you're getting out of tech. There's always going to have to be something put in, and there's always going to be a place where there's going to be a gap somewhere. Now, I could be wrong, and the analogy of hot baths isn't necessarily physics except in terms of heating them up and cooling

them off. I think it's maybe unrealistic to expect it to be possible to set up a system where everybody wins, because basically, the rules of the universe are everybody loses eventually and you can't cheat at the game. Maybe you can cheat temporarily, but you can't cheat permanently. It's going to come crashing down at some point.

I also wanted to ask you, in *Ancillary Sword,* about this character Dlique, who is a human being who was raised by aliens, and so has a very alien way of thinking. I want to read something this character says. The character says, "Eggs are so inadequate, don't you think? I mean, they ought to be able to become anything, but instead, you always get a chicken or a duck or whatever they're programmed to be. You never get anything interesting like regret or the middle of the night last week."

I love that character.

I just love that part. Could you just talk about that character and trying to create this raised-by-aliens character?

She was kind of tough, but she was also fun to write, because the idea is that the Presger translators are raised by aliens. In fact, they historically — none of this actually explicitly appears in this novel — but their origins are that they're cloned from human remains that the Presger took off of ships they destroyed. Originally, the first few of them had like no human contact whatsoever. They were completely grown and raised by these aliens, and trying to talk to them at first would be very difficult. They're still weird, but they're very scary. One of the things I was trying to do with her was to make someone who seemed kind of scatterbrained and silly and just bizarre. Yet at the same time, this is someone who is holding the fate of millions of people in her hands because she could go back to the aliens and say, "Yeah, they've broken the treaty. Kill them all." The Presger, who never are on stage for this novel, are really extraordinarily dangerous. There would be no way to stop them if they decided that the treaty had been broken. Mostly, I was just trying to have fun with her.

In the acknowledgements, among the people and institutions you thank is the Missouri Botanical Garden. I was curious what role the Missouri Botanical Garden played in inspiring this story?

Mostly, I knew that I needed gardens in the station, and the Missouri Botanical Garden actually is one of the top botanical gardens in the world, which I didn't realize when I was a kid. I grew up very close to them and visited them quite frequently. I was like, "Yeah, it's just the botanical gardens," and it's *not* just the botanical gardens. It's really fabulous. I spent a fair amount of time there while I was writing the novel thinking about how gardening would work on a space station. One of the cool things I got to do was they have a tour that you can pay for where you go back and look at their production greenhouses, which was really awesome. Actually, there are features of the beautiful display gardens, the gardens on the space station that Breq visits, that are lifted almost entirely from the Japanese garden at the Missouri Botanical Gardens.

This is in terms of the lake or what?

The lake and the fish, actually. The fish are there because I wanted them to be there. In the lake in the Japanese garden, there are these carp. They've been there since I was a little kid. The Japanese garden opened up in the seventies and I remember going all the time, and they have a food dispenser and you feed them. Of course, now they're huge. They're just gigantic. They're still there and you still can go feed them. It's just a beautiful garden, and I was like, "Well, I have to design my garden." I said, "I like that and I like that, and I'm just going to put it all together."

So then you mentioned that you're working now on the third book in this trilogy, which is called *Ancillary Mercy*. Is there anything you want to say about that one?

Maybe not.

Well, you mentioned the Presger are going to come on stage?

The Presger are going to turn up. The aliens themselves? That remains to be seen, but the Presger certainly. Obviously they wouldn't have turned up in book two if they weren't already aware of something going on. So they'll be turning up again in book three definitely, much more prominently.

Will this be in a different vibe from the first two books or is it going to be more or less like one of the other ones?

It will probably have a little more action than the last one. In some ways, it will be similar, because of course Breq is still a single-bodied person, and so her point of view is going to be much more similar to that of *Ancillary Sword* than *Ancillary Justice,* where we had her when she was still a ship. But I think the book will have a different feel to it.

We've been speaking with Ann Leckie, and her new book is called *Ancillary Sword.* Ann, thanks so much for joining us.

Thank you for having me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is a science fiction/fantasy talk show podcast. It is hosted by David Barr Kirtley, who is the author of thirty short stories, which have appeared in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales,* and *Lightspeed,* in books such as *Armored, The Living Dead, Other Worlds Than These,* and *Fantasy: The Best of the Year,* and on podcasts such as *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod.* He lives in New York.

Book Reviews: February 2015

Sunil Patel

A Darker Shade of Magic
V.E. Schwab
Hardcover / Ebook
ISBN 978-0765376459
Tor Books, February 2015
400 pages

Kell is a messenger/smuggler with the rare ability to travel between multiple Londons. Lila is a chaotic neutral thief with aspirations of being a pirate. These two unlikely companions are about to embark upon a dangerous, deadly adventure where the fates of multiple worlds are at stake.

The first hundred pages of *A Darker Shade of Magic* are a slow burn, full of worldbuilding and character backstory. While it doesn't feel like it's building up to something — plot-wise, the inciting incident could happen much earlier — V.E. Schwab needs to establish the setting and the rules of the world and its element-based magic, and the short, punchy chapters keep the pace up. Schwab has a peculiar problem in that Kell has *nine times* the screen time as Lila in these initial pages, but Lila is so incredibly vibrant in her brief appearances that I became impatient for the two characters to meet so that she could become a larger part of the story. And when they do, they face a formidable antagonist, malicious villains, a terrifying adversary . . . there are a lot of bad people in this book.

And Kell and Lila are two of them. Though Kell may not want to admit it, he is, like Lila, a taker of things, illegally carrying objects from one London to another and selling them to interested parties. But he has his reasons for doing so. Lila's philosophy is that if a thing is worth having, it's worth taking, and she practically steals the story out from underneath Kell, who, as a character, is way

more *interesting,* but isn't nearly as fun. Like a teenage Lyra Belacqua or Arya Stark, she's rough, clever, and resilient. She'll steal your heart and you won't even notice it's missing.

Once Kell and Lila begin their odd-couple magical antics, the book really takes off, and the body count begins to rise. Deaths are merciless and brutal, which raises the tension but also quickly decreases the number of intriguing supporting characters; I lamented the loss of their story potential. Our protagonists aren't even aware of the true body count, as Schwab supplements the story with additional POVs, including skin-crawlingly creepy scenes on the level of Stephen King or Neil Gaiman. Although she dips into several third-person voices, the book itself has a strong narrative voice that's a bit wry, lending the more horrific events more power in their understatedness. It's the energy and inventiveness of the prose that overcomes the fact that the multiple enemies are dispatched a bit too easily, and I felt like a lot of build-up fizzled out in the end. Still, the ending scenes are full of exciting magic and big character moments, making for a memorable resolution.

A Darker Shade of Magic introduces a fresh take on parallel universes with a pair of characters I long to see more of. (Especially Lila Bard. *You don't understand how much I love Lila Bard.* She's the kind of girl who doesn't think you can ever have too many knives, and she *will* stab you if you don't read this book.)

The Galaxy Game
Karen Lord
Trade Paperback / Ebook
ISBN 978-0345534071
Del Rey Books, January 2015
336 pages

Not having read *The Best of All Possible Worlds,* I found the world of *The Galaxy Game* intimidating in scope but entrancing in its detail. The prologue drops an immense amount of exposition, presumably as an introduction for a new reader like me, but then Karen Lord lets you fend for yourself as you scramble for context clues. It's a world that feels lived in because the narrative assumes you live there. Lord deftly uses deceptively simple words to conjure

up images (datacharm, mindship, aerolight), and her vivid descriptions convey so much (a cityscape is described as "slender, delicate, as if the spiky vertebrae of a saildragon had been stripped of meat and left to dry under the two suns"). Lord drops in offhand references to cloning and alternate timelines, suggesting an even greater depth to the world than what we see. And what we see is compelling enough: humans with psionic powers engaged in a game called Wallrunning, where psychically linked teams wear grav-bands and climb a tilting wall, like the coolest version of *American Gladiators* you could imagine.

I loved Rafi, a teenage boy with a high level of psionic power, considered especially dangerous because of his father's actions even though all he wants to do is play "snakes and ladders" (his name for Wallrunning). I wanted to reach into my Kindle and give him a hug. His best friend, Ntenman, serves as an entertaining foil, a wily scoundrel (one character calls him a "baby con man"), and their friend, Serendipity, displays more maturity and confidence in her psionic abilities than either of them. I wanted to see more of her. The three of them find themselves caught up in a time of great change, making the book a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of galactic upheaval.

Although I loved the world and the characters, I found the book somewhat frustrating. It jumps between several different third-person POVs, and in the early chapters, it's unclear who will be the main focus, making the narrative feel disjointed. For no reason that I could discern, Ntenman has a first-person POV, and if any one character would get a first-person POV, I'd expect it to be Rafi. I did love Ntenman's fun, energetic voice, full of verve, but it was consistently jarring. At no point could I concisely explain what was going on and why anyone was doing anything, not because characters were poorly written but because I, like Rafi, was being shuttled from plot point to plot point without being told why. Rafi seems to have little agency throughout the narrative, but powerful people want him to help them. The actual story doesn't start until two-thirds of the way through the novel, and the book has no real climax. It's to Lord's credit, however, that I remained engaged because I enjoyed the world and the characters so much I wanted to know where the story was going.

The Galaxy Game is dense, challenging science fiction that doesn't go where you'd expect it to, juggling many characters and

cultures in an epic story with very personal consequences.

Pacific Fire
Greg van Eekhout
Hardcover / Ebook
ISBN 978-0765328564
Tor Books, January 2015
336 pages

With *California Bones,* Greg van Eekhout introduced a fantastic alternate universe where the bones of long-dead mythical creatures are consumed for magical abilities: osteomancy. A couple chapters into *Pacific Fire,* he teases my greatest wish for the series: What if you could bring one of those mythical creatures back? (I saw *Jurassic Park.* I know you can do these things.)

It's ten years later, and Daniel Blackland, an osteomancer of incredible power, is on the run with a golem, Sam. Once Daniel gets wind of a plot to recreate a Pacific firedrake — a *dragon* — he vows to destroy it before it can ravage all of Los Angeles.

I took an instant liking to the teenage Sam, who struggles with questions of his own identity — and the legacy of the man he was made from — as well as simple things like wanting to date a girl but never being allowed to settle down because their enemies keep attacking. Inhuman characters are my jam, and there's something incredibly endearing about his desire to prove his worth as a person, to justify his existence independent of Daniel, his father figure. In contrast, Em, another golem, has no such angst and her competence and sharp wit make them highly enjoyable together. (Sadly, the rest of Daniel's team — Moth, Cassandra, and Jo — don't play as large a role in this book, but I loved Sam so much that it made up for it.)

Pacific Fire opens up the world, showing us more than the canal-filled city of Los Angeles, because this book isn't a thrilling heist tale: It's a thrilling adventure story. Van Eekhout plots the book like a sadist, gleefully throwing conflict after conflict at the characters. Things go wrong *all the time.* But he peppers in small victories and moments of levity to keep your spirits up, even when you're staring at the page wondering why someone is dead, that's not fair, you

can't do that. At times, dialogue or a bit of offhand narration made me laugh out loud, and then van Eekhout would end a scene with a brutal gut punch of a line. Although Sam takes center stage, Daniel is not completely out of the picture, and their stories dovetail to a devastating, unpredictable climax where I did not know what was going to happen and I did not know what I *wanted* to happen.

While it certainly helps to have read *California Bones, Pacific Fire* stands on its own as an exciting, engaging story, and though it doesn't end on a cliffhanger, it soundly sets up the conclusion to the trilogy. A creative magic system, a fictional SoCal that actually contains Latinos, power struggles, friendship, family, a dash of romance, air travel, land travel, sea travel, someone from a boy band — this book has it all!

Stranger
Rachel Manija Brown and Sherwood Smith
Hardcover / Ebook
ISBN 978-0670014804
Viking Juvenile, November 2014
432 pages

In a market saturated with young adult dystopias, Rachel Manija Brown and Sherwood Smith's *Stranger* stands out by not portraying a post-apocalyptic future ruled by an oppressive government that throws children into a personality test-filled maze of games. In *Stranger,* the apocalypse happened, wiping out modern technology and forever changing the environment, now populated by vampire trees (that is what they are actually called in the book) and preternatural creatures like teleporting squirrels (who are as adorable as they sound). Plus certain individuals now develop Change powers, supernatural abilities ranging from telekinesis to controlling the weather.

Society has rebuilt itself — not completely, not as a civilization, but in outposts and kingdoms, the landscape now resembling the Wild West. The walled frontier town of Las Anclas, with its fancy parties and popular restaurants, is a genuinely nice place to live and there is no dark secret behind it: These people have simply made a good life for themselves. It's rare to see such an optimistic vision of

the future; in fact, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other common prejudices have disappeared, replaced by bigotry toward the Changed. The townsfolk of Las Anclas — and there are many of them with names, which makes the town feel alive but can be hard to keep track of, since many are indistinguishable — are doing just fine until the titular stranger arrives.

Besides the worldbuilding, the major strength of this book is absolutely its characters, a more diverse cast than I've seen in any young adult book. Ross Juarez (Latino) searches for artifacts in the most dangerous places and isn't sure how to assimilate into society. Mia Lee (Korean) builds weapons and isn't sure whether she will kiss a boy. Jennie Riley (black) teaches children and protects the town and isn't sure if she can do both. Yuki Nakamura (Japanese) patrols with the Rangers and isn't sure whether he will leave Las Anclas. Felicité Wolfe (Latina) is an awful, entitled, duplicitous human being and I love her. In a neat bit of typography, each character's POV gets a different serif font, except for Ross, whose sans-serif font visually reminds the reader that he's an outsider. Any one of these characters could end up someone's favorite.

Although the action-packed first chapter seems to herald a more adventurous story, *Stranger* focuses much more on character than plot, as every character has his or her own inner conflicts to struggle with. Brown and Smith strike a good balance between "Who will So-and-so take to the dance?" and "Does Ross's presence in Las Anclas threaten the entire town's safety?" Even though there isn't a strong "What's going to happen next??" vibe, I couldn't stop reading because I liked the characters and the setting so much. (Warning: Do not read this book if you are hungry, because the sumptuous descriptions of food will only make things worse.) By the end of the book, characters have made choices and secrets have been revealed (though not to everyone), but this is an introduction. I anxiously wait to see where the series goes from here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sunil Patel is a Bay Area fiction writer and playwright who has written about everything from ghostly cows to talking beer. His plays have been performed at San Francisco Theater Pub and San Francisco Olympians Festival, and his story "The Gramadevi's Lament" will appear in the upcoming anthology, *Genius Loci: Tales of the Spirit of Place.* He loves to create new stories, but he also loves introducing people to

stories he loves. Find out more at ghostwritingcow.com, where you can watch his plays, or follow him @ghostwritingcow. His Twitter has been described as “engaging,” “exclamatory,” and “crispy, crunchy, peanut buttery.”

Artist Gallery: Julie Dillon

Julie Dillon received her BFA from Sacramento State University and continued her training at the Academy of Arts University, San Francisco and Watts Atelier. Julie has created illustrations for clients including Simon & Schuster, Tor Books, Penguin Books, Oxford University Press, and Wizards of the Coast. Her work has won a Hugo Award and two Chesley Awards, and been nominated for the World Fantasy Award. Julie currently lives and works in Northern California. Visit www.juliedillonart.com to learn more.

[To view the gallery, turn the page.]

Artist Spotlight: Julie Dillon

Henry Lien

The Chinese-American author Ha Jin once said something along the lines of, "We would not have to ask images to reflect reality if we did not ask reality to reflect images." Your work reflects so much more diversity in the characters depicted than one often sees in SFF illustration, especially fantasy illustration. Non-objectified women, people of color, people with physical challenges, people of different body shapes. Your depictions of same-sex love and affection in SFF settings are particularly memorable. Your work embraces the reality of who is reading/viewing SFF work today, and includes groups not used to seeing themselves reflected in SFF illustration very often. Did you feel there was a lack of sufficient diversity in SFF illustration and was this a conscious response?

It is a definite conscious response now, but I have to admit that earlier on it wasn't something I fully realized. When I was first getting into art, I was trying to paint like everyone else and fit in with the other digital artists of the time. Looking at everyone else's art, I just thought SFF art and concept art was supposed to look a certain way, and that particular look tended to feature only certain types of people, in specific and rigid gender roles. As time went on, I slowly stopped worrying so much about fitting in with the concept art crowd in general, and focused more on creating more of what I wanted to see, both in terms of subject matter as well as in the types of people I drew, particularly in terms of how I drew women. I wanted to draw women in particular being active participants in their own stories and surroundings. It also helped that I started seeing more art from other artists who were doing the same thing. Now that I'm more tuned in, diversity is definitely something I push for. I want everyone who enjoys SFF to be able to see themselves reflected in artwork, and if I can help do that in even a small way with my art, I want to try.

Have you met with any resistance from publishers/clients when you have included diverse characters in your work? How did they respond? How did you respond?

The response so far has been overwhelmingly positive. The only time I've gotten feedback from a client asking me to change a character is if that character was intended to look a certain way. But I wouldn't call that resistance, but rather the art director making sure the author's character was drawn the way they wanted. The only negativity I've ever gotten was from a handful of random people on my social media sites (like DeviantArt or Tumblr) who occasionally complained that the women I depicted weren't drawn in a way that they deemed attractive. Whenever that happens, I just tell them that I don't necessarily care about limiting my work to what they find sexually attractive.

Many of your works have a joyful, utopian feel, especially the pieces that incorporate animals. While you do have works with elements of darkness and menace in them, bleakness and cynicism seem entirely absent from your work. Even the piece with the towering minotaur in a spherical labyrinth is more awe-inspiring and wondrous than dark. Again, did you feel that there was an overabundance of bleak and cynical imagery in SFF illustration and was this a conscious response?

When given the choice, I definitely prefer to do something more hopeful overall. There is enough cynicism in the world as it is, and I want to try to make sure that I'm putting positive things out into the world instead of adding to the cynicism. When I do draw something darker or sadder or violent, I try to have a thematic or narrative purpose, and not make something dark just for the sake of being dark. There is nothing wrong with that, it's just not what I personally like to do when left to my own devices. My favorite SFF stories and films have always been ones that uplift and fill you with wonder. Dark, gritty, dystopian settings just aren't my thing. When I was first starting out, most of my commissioned work assignments were for gaming and called for depictions of warriors and monsters killing each other. That definitely can be fun, to an extent, but after a while I wanted to spend more time drawing people working together, people being happy, people exploring and discovering

new things, and doing things other than fighting each other. I wanted to work towards painting what I wanted to see, instead of just what looked cool.

Your work seems to have a wide appeal to different age groups. Did you intentionally wish to embrace viewers of different ages in your work?

I don't think it was an overly intentional choice; it just happens that the work I like to do frequently ends up being suitable for people of different ages. I don't generally set out trying to make pieces that would specifically be for kids, and on the whole I don't think you necessarily need to. I think you can be honest with your approach and ideas in your work without watering things down, and kids can still enjoy it. Sometimes I stray outside the all-ages acceptability bounds, though, but not too far, and not too often, in part because I still worry too much about what people might think. I worry that I would have to hide it from some audiences, or that it wouldn't appeal to many people. That's a hang-up that I need to work on and move past. One thing I've been learning these past few years is that the more honest and open I am in my approach and the more I put of myself into my work, the better and stronger my work is.

Talk to us a little about your technique. Your work is digital, but it seems like you are trying hard to maintain an analog feel to your works. Is that intentional and can you explain in layperson terms how you achieve that?

I think it's partly intentional, partly that I have a hard time getting my work to be really polished and clean, which means I end up with a more painterly look. That said, I really like the look of big thick paint, of deliberate brush strokes and bold choices, and I feel like that is an exciting look in any medium. I still tend to overwork things and repaint areas over and over until I get them right, instead of being able to lay a color down confidently the first time. More than a specific style, I strive for confidence in the placement of each brushstroke, using my time to layer the color the way I want rather than waste time trying to figure out what a form is

supposed to look like. It's something I'm working on, and I have been slowly getting better at it.

Getting an "analog" look, for me, is more about trying to keep in mind the lessons I picked up working with charcoal and real paint — focusing on line control, building a solid composition, balancing light and color, having variation in hard and soft edges, instead of making everything plasticky and airbrush smooth. The faster and looser I work, the more it looks painterly, and while that is more fun, it doesn't tend to look as finished as I feel is needed for publication, so I'll go in and finesse and refine things to get them to as much of a polished finish as I am reasonably capable of. It's hard sometimes to find a balance between keeping the energy of a more loose piece versus an overly polished piece, though.

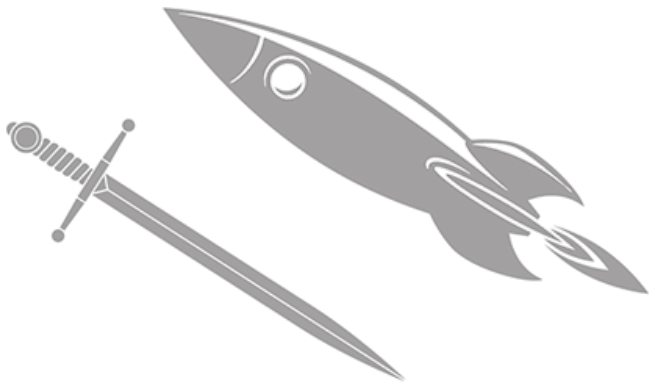
What is your dream project?

My dream project at the moment is being able to write and illustrate a large-scale illustrated novel of my own. I have a few ideas that I'm still brainstorming and concepting out, but it's been so long since I tried plotting out a complete story that it's slow going. Ideally, I'd love to eventually self-publish several books, and get the chance to flesh out and develop my own worlds and stories instead of just doing one-off illustrations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry Lien is an art dealer in Los Angeles (glassgaragegallery.com). He represents artists from North America, Asia, Europe, and South America. His artists have appeared in *ARTnews, Art in America, Juxtapoz,* the *Huffington Post,* and *Time Magazine,* and been collected by and exhibited in institutions and museums around the world. Henry has also served as the President of the West Hollywood Fine Art Dealers' Association and a Board Member of the West Hollywood Avenues of Art and Design. He is also the Arts Editor at *Interfictions.* Henry also has extensive experience as an attorney and teaches at UCLA Extension. In addition, Henry is a speculative fiction writer. He is a Clarion West 2012 graduate. He has sold stories to publications including *Asimov's, Analog,* the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* and been nominated for the Nebula. He is originally from Taiwan. Visit his author website at henrylien.com.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



Author Spotlight: Brooke Bolander

Robyn Lupo

How did this story start for you? Were there any surprises in writing this one?

Hilariously enough, it started as a commissioned flash piece for a lit 'zine. I'm not even kidding. The exchange went thusly:

"Say, would you be interested in writing us a pulp story? We've read your previous work and we think you'd be really good at writing pulp."

"Sure thing, mister! I'll keep it short and sweet, under a thousand words, and I'll have it done in *two months!"*

And lo, the heavens did split open, and the Gods of Wordcount and Deadline did laugh until they were sick all over the cowering writers of the earth. It turned out to be the lengthiest thing I've ever written. I did not, as you may have already guessed, make my deadline. I began writing in spring of 2012 and finally finished last February. For someone who rarely ventures past 7,000 words on any given project, it was something of a shock.

I think people are going to be a little surprised by this one, for better or worse. Most of my other stories so far have come from a particular region of my brain — the bit made of bones and fur and feathers and Neko Case and Nick Cave, ankle-deep in ivy and rotting horse apples. Rhye's tale is composed in the main of the *other* stuff I love — Tarantino movies and Queen, *Blade Runner* and punk rock recorded in damp basements, *Ghost in the Shell* and Scorsese and cheap bourbon and piercings and watching *Drive* with the surround sound cranked. The part of me that finds the final ten seconds of *Fight Club* or the elevator scene in the aforementioned *Drive* deeply romantic, basically (my sense of romance is admittedly a tad fucked, something that also shines through in the story). It's a big, loud, silly part of me, but that doesn't make it any *less* a part of me.

The other big surprise came shortly after I finished, when I found out that there's a craft cocktail called the Rack 'n Rye, conceived

and crafted by the alcohol alchemists at New York's PDT. I had heard of a Rock n' Rye before, but this variant is made with arrack, a rum-like liquor from Southeast Asia. I swear I had no prior knowledge of the damn thing, but it is absolutely delicious and I totally advise making and drinking two or three while you read the story, in honor of our heroine and hero ("arguably a riff on the classic Old Fashioned, the Rack-n-Rye finds unlikely lovers paired together," says the recipe).

One of the things I noticed was that Rhye's feelings were big and bombastic, lots of anger, an emotional fragility that is as big as her rage when we first meet her, as well as her love for Rack. How did you tap into these emotions, particularly the rage? And given how big her emotions are, what was it like shifting your writing from Rhye's view to Rack's?

Several years ago, I asked a good friend to really tell me what he thought of me, no holds barred. His response — and I'm quoting verbatim, here, because this is the sort of thing you write down and keep in a fireproof safe deposit box — was, "all other things aside, I think your grand and god-given talent is *endless, white-hot rage.* Your anger is not a wild explosion that tears apart whole city blocks: It is a PSG-1 that will bore through the adversary's skull from 800 yards away; it is a samurai sword where the dude will look down at his body for a second before realizing that he has been sliced in half. You kick a hole in the speaker, pull the plug, then you jet."

So, uh, yeah. I'm not sure I'm totally that person anymore, as that was a good many years ago and I've since learned not to sweat the small stuff, but she's still in here, ready to be called out when needed. On another level, culturally there is a push against angry women. You're a bitch; you're an ice queen; you're oversensitive; you're a psychotic prima donna who needs to "stop being so shrill" and chill out. You're Courtney Love. The male-driven world is forever threatened by a pissed-off lady. And hey, you know what? *Fuck that.* We've got more than ever to be in a buzzing neon 24/7 open-all-nite rage about. All those rights angry women a hundred years ago fought so hard for are slowly but surely being peeled away, and our white-hot focused pissedoffitude is the only thing that's gonna save us from getting turned into soup. Be righteous. Be

furious. Be chaotic. Punch a fucking hole in the wall until your knuckles look like smashed baby birds. It is good and healthy and the universe desperately needs it.

Rack is what he is: a good person. You know those people; it takes a lot to provoke them, otherwise they're cooler than a cucumber shoved between the cushions of a leather couch in January. I *know* plenty of that type, even if I am decidedly not among their number, so it wasn't too hard. I think the most difficult part was cutting down on the number of fucks used, honestly.

What prompted the choice to have Rhye fight herself? Regarding Rhye herself, is there anything about her you drew from your own life and experiences?

There comes a point in a person's life — and by "a person" I guess I mean me a little, maybe — when you have to learn to accept kindness. Nobody gets where they're going by themselves. They can be the toughest, meanest, most nail-spittin' mofo on the block and still, STILL, at some point in their life, *someone* is going to give them a hand up. If you've got a lot of self-loathing going on internally, that can be one of the biggest challenges you'll ever face. "I can't take help from friends, I'm a shithead, I don't deserve it. How could anyone ever love a fuckup like me?" You get caught in this self-destructive feedback loop where you won't ask for help and you're building walls and generally just treating the folks around you like shit, because you don't really believe they care and hey, not like they're gonna stick around anyways, they'll hate me eventually because I'm a *secret asshole.* And then when they really *do* get fed up and all your pushing and bristling and weird behavior finally drives them off for good, you say, *see? I always knew it would end like this.* It can irreparably fuck up your life, thinking and acting like that.

Rhye's voice is the closest to my regular voice I've ever come in a story — the one I use online, the one inside my head. A touch more psychotic, a splash less thoughtful, maybe, but close enough for government work. In my experience, finally dragging that part of yourself from the back alley where it's smoking out into the daylight requires three things: looking inward more than you may be comfortable with, understanding that your personal issues are

yours and yours alone, and trusting other people when they say they've got your back. It makes sense that I would end up literalizing the process, I suppose. I'm nothing if not metaphorically minded.

Other Rhye-like adventures? I caught a bullet casing down my bra at the gun range once. For those unacquainted with the vagaries of firing handguns and the wacky mishaps that may ensue if one is not properly attired, when the shell is ejected, it is a scalding, skin-seeking brass projectile that can and will get stuck anywhere and everywhere on your person. I've seen them land inside pockets, I've seen them lodge and stick between the earpiece on a pair of safety goggles and a friend's temple. I happened to be wearing a tank top that day. You only make that mistake *once,* dear readers.

What's next for you?

Still trying to hack out a novel, still making the con rounds. Every day is a battle to get words out, but if this story has shown me anything, it's that I *am* capable of writing long-form. So we shall see.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn Lupo has been known to frequent southwestern Ontario with her graduate student husband and elderly dog. She writes, reads, and plays video games. She is personal assistant to three cats.

Author Spotlight: John Kessel

Lee Hallison

Why did you choose to tell a story about an encounter that never happened?

I was reading some biographies of H.G. Wells for a piece I had to write, and I discovered that he visited Washington D.C. in 1934. I knew that my father was in the Civilian Conservation Corps in Alexandria at about that time. The juxtaposition struck a spark in me. I had to stretch a few things and make up some others to get them in the same place at the same time, but I felt there was something there worth writing about.

You received awards and acclaim from the science fiction community for this story. What did your dad think of it? Did you show it to him before publishing it or did you surprise him?

I did show this story to my father before it appeared. He thanked me for writing it. He told me he was surprised that I was able to describe some of what it was like to be in the CCC without having experienced it. He was not a demonstrative man, and it was a moment I will not forget. That would have been during the Christmas holidays of 1990. He died in November 1993 at the age of eighty-nine.

Have you ever topped a tree like your dad did? Besides the kind of work you did, how were you different from your dad?

Never topped a tree, but I did do quite a bit of physical work when I was a young man. My dad was a jack-of-all-trades but made his living as a carpenter. I learned a few things from him. He never finished high school and I got a Ph.D., so that put some distance between us, but he was a reader. I think my concern for craft, my

obsession with careful story construction, owes something to my observing the care and attention to detail he took in his carpentry.

The two men are both humiliated by their fictional encounter, and then both are rescued by Duke Ellington's music. You said, back when you wrote this, that you hope to understand what his jazz teaches — that life constrained is not life wasted. Do you understand and/or agree with that now?

I've been working on that one most of my adult life. We don't get everything we want or achieve everything we dream of achieving; regret is a part of everyone's life. You can make yourself miserable dwelling on the gap between dreams and reality. I can say all this easier than I can live it, but I can live it better now than I could when I was a young man. The Cootie Williams trumpet solo on Ellington's 1934 version of "Solitude" still takes my breath away.

The ending, where you say art does not have to deliver a message in order to say something important, resonated with many readers. When you look back at this story, do you still feel the power of art to change the moment is significant enough to keep making art?

Art *can* change the world, though we can't count on that as much as we would like it to. Still, that moment when you hear a song that speaks to you, or lose yourself in a book, or laugh out loud at a movie — what's better than that? It's worth working hard in order to create those moments for people.

What are you working on now?

I'm excited to have finished the novel I've been working on for years, *The Moon and the Other.* It's a political novel and a love story (or two love stories) set in the mid-twenty-second century in two contending lunar societies, sort of *A Tale of Two Cities* on the moon. It picks up some characters I wrote about in my "Lunar Quartet" stories in the early aughts. I swore off writing short stories while I was working on the novel, so I'm eager to get back to doing some

short fiction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Hallison writes fiction in an old Seattle house where she lives with her patient spouse, an impatient teen, two lovable dogs, and the memories of several wonderful cats. She's held many jobs — among them a bartender, a pastry chef, a tropical plant-waterer, a CPA, and a university lecturer. An East Coast transplant, she simply cannot fathom cherry blossoms in March.

Author Spotlight: Caroline Yoachim

Lee Hallison

What triggered the idea of a person being offered a solution to a problem that did not exist for them?

I find psychology fascinating. How do people process sensory information? How do we react to adversity, or to opportunity? Which aspects of our lives are most important to our identity?

"Red Planet" is a counterpoint to a story I wrote a couple years ago. "Harmonies of Time" featured a deaf character who eagerly embraced first a newfound ability to hear, and later an alien time-sense of past and future. In "Red Planet," I wanted to show a different perspective — someone who is happy the way she is and isn't interested in acquiring a new sense.

You are a photographer, so sight must be an important sense for you. Was writing this story difficult or painful in light of that? Would you make the same choice Tara does?

It's hard to say whether I would make the same choice. Certainly if I became blind now, after having had sight my entire life, I would jump at the chance to get my vision back. But there is a huge difference between losing sight as an adult (or even as a child) and never having had it to begin with. What would sight mean to me if I had been born blind? The closest analog would be if someone offered me a new alien sense that was potentially useful, but also disruptive to my current perceptions of the world. But that isn't quite the same situation, because many aspects of our world are designed for people who can see. Gaining a novel alien sense would make me different. Gaining sight after having been blind made Tara more like everyone else.

Would I make the choice Tara does? In the story, Tara is someone who successfully navigates her life with the senses that she has. She is a scientist, thriving in the academic world, and the only

major roadblock that she can't overcome without sight is the vision test to get to Mars. If I was Tara, I might make the choices she made. Of course, I'm not Tara. So . . . maybe?

Did you research biochemical uses for electric eel cells or theoretical avenues for optical enhancement, or was the futuristic vision treatment something you just imagined?

Modified electrical eel cells for biomedical implants is a real line of research. I stumbled across an article about it, and filed it away as a cool idea that I'd like to use in a story. Modified eel cells make a great candidate for powering biomedical implants because, unlike traditional batteries, there is no danger of toxic chemicals being released if the eel cells fail. They're just ordinary cells. So the entire system can be implanted under the skin, rather than having an external power source.

There were a couple other topics I researched to write the story — the effect of climate change on phytoplankton morphology, and Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation as a treatment for depression. A common saying in writing is "write what you know," but I think a good corollary would be "if you don't know, learn."

The experiences Tara has as a blind scientist felt authentic — did you work with anyone with a sight disability or have you had experiences that helped you connect to her?

One of the many inspirations for this story was an article written by a blind marine biologist, Dr. Geerat Vermeij, about his experiences in the field. The article gave me a feel for what it was like for a blind person to try to navigate the academic world. I also read articles about teaching biology to students who are blind, to get a feel for different approaches that might be used.

Any new projects on the horizon?

I've been playing around with a short story technique I call flashmash. Basically, I write a series of interrelated flash stories and then mash them together into a single story. "Five Stages of Grief

After the Alien Invasion" was the first of these, and it came out in *Clarkesworld* last August. Since then, I've written a few other stories this way — one of which is forthcoming in *Lightspeed* later this year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Hallison writes fiction in an old Seattle house where she lives with her patient spouse, an impatient teen, two lovable dogs, and the memories of several wonderful cats. She's held many jobs — among them a bartender, a pastry chef, a tropical plant-waterer, a CPA, and a university lecturer. An East Coast transplant, she simply cannot fathom cherry blossoms in March.

Author Spotlight: David Barr Kirtley

Robyn Lupo

Shifting points of view are often difficult to write, yet you present it in masterful form in "Veil of Ignorance." What inspired this story?

I first encountered John Rawls' concept of the Veil of Ignorance in a political theory seminar in college. I thought it would be interesting to explore that idea in science fiction, but I couldn't think of how to do it. A year or two later I re-read Alfred Bester's classic story "Fondly Fahrenheit," which uses a shifting first person viewpoint to explore the confusion of identity that exists between a mentally ill man and his robot servant. It occurred to me that that sort of shifting first person viewpoint could be used with a larger group of characters to explore the Veil of Ignorance. I closely analyzed Bester's story and tweaked his approach to make it a bit more clear and consistent, which I felt was important to avoid confusion, given that I'd be shifting between five different characters. I wrote the story and had it critiqued that summer at a workshop led by James Gunn at the Center for the Study of Science Fiction. At that point the story ended with Brad's death. Some readers felt that ending was too abrupt, so I came up with the final scene and added it to the story. Half the group said they liked the new ending and half said they preferred the old one, and I was conflicted, but in the end I decided to keep the new ending, because I thought it was pretty clever.

You address the issue of gender roles and expectations with an adroit, subtle touch. How do you approach writing characters that are intrinsically different than you — writing The Other as it were?

My biggest concern with the story was that readers would be confused by the constant viewpoint shifts, so I tried to make the

characters all recognizable types, so that readers could get a handle on them as quickly as possible. I was thinking in terms of something like *Scooby Doo,* where you have the jock, the princess, the nerd, the stoner, etc. Some people in the workshop said my story reminded them of *The Breakfast Club,* though I'd never seen that movie when I wrote the story. I think there's a tradeoff to be made here between clarity and characterization, and as a result of my focus on clarity the characters aren't as individualized as they might have been, but I'm glad it worked for you as well as it did.

The story presents a fairly dark take on relationships and gender roles, and that was influenced by some unpleasant experiences I had in college. So to the extent that it's effective it's probably just a result of observing life with some level of empathy. Later on I undertook a conscious project to improve my ability to write female characters, and I set out to read 100 memoirs written by women. I think I made it up to about eighty before I had to set that project aside and move on to other things, but I did find that very helpful. I'd strongly encourage aspiring writers to read memoirs written by all sorts of different people.

Telepathy can be as enlightening as it is invasive. If you could use the drug in the story, with whom would you like to share such a link? Would gender or race make a difference in your selection?

I think in the short term telepathy would destroy any hope of productive human relationships, so I certainly wouldn't volunteer for it if it involved sharing the thoughts of anyone I knew or wanted to maintain contact with. It might be interesting to share the thoughts of someone I knew I'd never see again. In that case, yes, I think for the sake of curiosity I'd want to share the thoughts of people who were as different from me as possible. One thing I'd be really interested to explore would be sharing the thoughts of people with wildly different beliefs from mine. I've never been religious, and I'm constantly trying to understand how intelligent people can believe things that to me seem so obviously imaginary, like miracles, talking to God, immortal souls, etc. Maybe if I could share the thoughts of those people, it would finally make sense to me how they could believe those things.

If some technique is ever developed that does allow people to share their thoughts, I think it would be extraordinarily disruptive, but that if we were to survive that period of transition, it might be better for us in the long term, now that everyone was being totally honest with each other. It would be nice to have politicians and business leaders who we knew were always being forthright, and I strongly suspect that a great deal of interpersonal hostility would melt away without secret fears and shames to drive them. I also strongly suspect that most religions would crumble away if every adherent were simultaneously forced to be completely honest with their fellow believers about all their doubts, but as a lifelong atheist I'm maybe not in the best position to judge that.

Writers often claim there is no perfect murder, just as they claim there are no original story ideas. The best writers make a point of exploring such tropes, often breaking the mold in new and satisfying ways. Are there any themes or tropes you would like to someday explore in your works?

I have two themes that I seem to return to over and over. One is characters with good intentions who somehow find themselves having created a horrible mess and who are now seen as villains or monsters. The other is the idea that reality is not what we perceive it to be, that one day we'll suddenly find that impossible things are happening to us, because we were ignorant of the bigger picture. Many of my favorite stories deal with that idea of upending reality. (Examples include the Amber series by Roger Zelazny as well as pretty much everything by Philip K. Dick.) I've put a fair amount of thought into a sword & sorcery novel called *The Sword of Ontology* that explores that idea, and hopefully I'll get around to writing it one of these days.

On *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy,* avid listeners share in your exploration of geekish interests ranging from genre film reviews to the business end of science fiction mega-dynasties to the realities of climate concerns. How do you feel hosting a podcast with such a wide range of interests has changed your approach to writing?

Unfortunately the main effect that the podcast has had on my writing is to distract me from it. *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* is largely a one-man show these days, though John Joseph Adams helps out a lot in the guest booking and overall strategic planning departments. But I handle all the really time-consuming stuff — reading the books, researching the guests, drafting the interview questions, doing the audio production, and writing the posts for Wired.com. I generally work on the show from 8 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week, which doesn't leave time for much else, but things have been going so well with the show that I'm loath to lose momentum on it by trying to juggle multiple projects. I like to tell myself that someday, when I do find time to write more fiction, I'll be able to utilize all the knowledge I've gained from researching and interviewing so many different authors, and also that I'll be able to apply the unbelievable work habits I've developed doing the podcast to my writing, and also that the large audience I've cultivated doing the podcast will be interested in my writing as well, but who knows if any of those things are true.

But I figure that sooner or later I'll get to the point where the novelty of having my own talk show will start to wear off, and where the show is established enough that I feel like I can afford to slack off a bit, at which time I can start multi-tasking more and get back to writing fiction. Ideally I'd like the show to be making enough money that I could afford to hire an actual staff to help me with it, but that's a long way off.

What can readers expect from you in 2015? What new prizes are in store?

Well, the current plan is to produce about fifty new episodes of *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* this year, which should keep me pretty busy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn Lupo has been known to frequent southwestern Ontario with her graduate student husband and elderly dog. She writes, reads, and plays video games. She is personal assistant to three cats.

Author Spotlight: Mary Rickert

Lee Hallison

You often say your fiction is fictional but springs from events and things you observe. What inspired this story?

Yes, of course my fiction springs from what is observed, whether externally or internally. What I recall of the process of writing this story is that I went to the library and collected a pile of books on things that interested me such as butterflies and mythology. The writing was a process of discovery. Nothing was planned. I picked out the girl's name, Lantanna (which is a bush that attracts butterflies) and went on from there.

Why did you choose to have Emma, the girl who observes, die in a self-started fire?

The best answer I can give is that, actually, I am the one who observes and this is what I observed happening.

Lantanna tries repeatedly to communicate with Quetzl. Were you surprised when she finally completely opens up and he rejects her, or did you have that in mind from the start?

I was surprised.

This was your first published story. What do you think has changed about your writing in the years since?

I hope I've gotten better.

You published your first novel, *The Memory Garden,* to much acclaim this year. Are you working on another novel or have

you returned to short stories? Anything new forthcoming?

I'm working on another novel and a few short stories. The audiobook of *The Memory Garden,* narrated by Tavia Gilbert, came out from Blackstone Audio at the end of December. I am quite excited about this. I haven't heard it yet and can't wait to listen to what Tavia does with it: blackstonelibrary.com/the-memory-garden.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Hallison writes fiction in an old Seattle house where she lives with her patient spouse, an impatient teen, two lovable dogs, and the memories of several wonderful cats. She's held many jobs — among them a bartender, a pastry chef, a tropical plant-waterer, a CPA, and a university lecturer. An East Coast transplant, she simply cannot fathom cherry blossoms in March.

Author Spotlight: Maria Davana Headley

Sandra Odell

"And The Winners Will Be Swept Out To Sea" is filled with poignant, lonely, lovely images. What inspired you to set this tale to the page?

I ran across a court case from the 1640s, a man who got put to death for consorting with a water nymph. He insisted it had really happened, and he was executed. He could've just said it never occurred. That makes me think that it was about love, not just sex. There's something really moving in the notion, in my opinion, of this guy dying for a woman everyone said was perhaps imaginary. I may write some more about it, actually, even though it ended up a little bit in here. So, this story? Came out of that kernel. And then it grew. I had a dream in which I ran into John Clute, of all people, and he was insisting that I should go to this Burning Man crossed with Venice Biennale festival called End Beach, which is exactly as described in the story. In the dream, I was furious, because John was insisting that sacrifice was actually winning, that I should go right down to End Beach and lay down my treasures, and that if I won, I'd get swept out to sea and eaten. *As the prize.* I was like, WHY? WHY WOULD I DO THAT, JOHN? HOW IS THAT WINNING? And John, repository of centuries of science fiction and fantasy stories that he is, insisted that there was a long history of such things. There was a second part involving me being chained to a rock, waiting for a monster to come get me. Thank you, Greek myths. I woke up from the dream, and wrote the story in about five frenzied hours, trying to answer the question of how being swept away might be a win.

I write a lot about love, of course, and it's always about how damn complicated it is, whether between the parties in love, or between them and the world. I'm particularly interested in love between flawed equals. The main character in this story is hundreds, perhaps thousands of years old, and she's been alone for much of that time, never meeting her match. The story was an

exploration of that theme, the possibility of constricting oneself to loneliness for too long, and then being wrested from it by impossible love. The complications of love between two people who both fundamentally require solitude in order to operate, and who both are wildly flawed with messy histories? Yeah, I've been there.

Depression and its cousin fear play a major part in the story, both for the main character's lover and her perceptions of events. Was it a challenge to address the concept in such a setting?

Yep. This one was actually agony to write, which is why I had to write it so quickly. I put everything I know about loving someone who is deep in depression into it, and everything I know about terror of abandonment, too. Dark depression is almost a supernatural occurrence. The person experiencing it is living in an alternate reality, and it's a terrible one. The main character has already lost a lot, and has spent years protecting herself from losing more. When she meets her lover, she lets her guard down. And then . . . this isn't a happy ever after story, though I'd say it's not a misery ever after either. It's more complicated than that by the end. I'm also always interested in exploring fantastical elements in totally prosaic settings. There's something really moving to me in extraordinary yet earthbound magic, the magic of the main character slipping down the drain and into the sewers, for example, to explore the city below, coming back up and getting straight back into the shower with her cup of tea. In this case, the story takes place in our known world, in hotels, in waterbeds, in a sushi restaurant, at a hippie festival, in London, in New York, but there are monsters in it, alongside and underneath everything else, and the monsters feel the pain we normally associate with humans. One of them feels that her nature is what it is, and she doesn't resist it. The other tries to resist, and is made miserable by resisting.

Water is often associated with the feminine in myths and legends, and you portray a vivid, classically elemental character. Becoming one with the rain is no more strange to her than snuggling on the couch. If you were to revisit this world, how would you portray the elements of fire, earth, and

air? Would they also be feminine, or would you explore a more masculine perspective with some of them?

I don't think too much about gender when it comes to stuff like this. I'm all over the map when it comes to narrator's gender identity, and I feel as comfortable writing from a male perspective as a female one, as long as I'm getting the character down. I think it's all precise character, not so much any kind of gendered "nature." Maybe early reading of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* colored my feelings here. I've done a female air elemental before — she's the West Wind's daughter, in *Queen of Kings,* and she's married to a male witch from a tribe that wars with the wind, but she's the real warrior in the duo. In the case of "And The Winners . . . ," the female narrator is the elemental because it means she can merge with something larger than herself, very easily. She's capable of casually becoming one with someone else's tears, and of dividing herself into raindrops, and becoming an entire sea. I wanted her to have that capacity, because I wanted her to have the perspective that comes from that. She's always waiting for things to change, because they always do, but she loves someone who sees the world as much more fixed. She can't understand this aspect of him at all. You can love someone and not understand them. It happens all the time. She keeps trying to advise him based on her own literal fluidity, but he's not fluid. I could easily see a world in which I reversed all this, and made the character (here depicted as male) female. The problems would be the same, at least in this story. Her problems aren't the problems of a human woman in human society. They're something else, problems of nature and character.

In both memoir and fiction, you explore themes such as love, the darker side of passion, pain, and what it means to be a woman, all intricate, detailed subjects. As a writer, what is one topic you've always wanted to tackle but haven't yet?

EEEE. Wow, I don't know! I guess I see the world in little flashing images, which spur stories that sometimes orbit certain themes, not because I plan them that way due to wanting to tackle specific topics. I do tend to like the challenge of new styles, though, so I often shift genres and play with tropes snagged from elsewhere. Lately I've been playing with the Great American Mid-Century

Literary Novel tropes of the suburb, both stylistically and in terms of plot. That's fun, and it's something I never felt a draw to write about before. I'm also very interested in writing about class politics, so that has some overlap. I like to smash a genre lens onto a known literary structure, if that makes sense, and I'm feeling quite interested in that dated notion of the Problem Novel, a big sprawling epic, seen through a filter wherein fantastical things might happen. I guess that's a kind of Magical Realist take, huh? Maybe that's a thing I'm inclined to work at these days, but a very American version of it. I came up reading Sam Shepard alongside John Cheever and Toni Morrison, and I'm interested always in pressing my varied reading history together into my own attempt at an America. That's the goal, ultimately, huge and crazy as it is. Lack of ambition has never been my problem. Lack of execution on the other hand? Lack of time? I want a thousand years!

What projects are currently in the works? What can readers expect next from Maria Dahvana Headley?

My young adult novel debut, *Magonia,* is out at the end of April from HarperCollins. Sky skips, pirates, and a broken-hearted girl trying to decide between worlds. Love between opposites in that story, too. I'm finishing up the sequel to that as I write this. Since this story came partially from a dream, I'll say I'm working on a novella too, which comes from a dream I had while rooming with Sofia Samatar at World Fantasy last year. Explorers and a fairy tale mashed up into a period story I can't wait to get out into the world, though it might be a little while. Lots of other secret projects, as usual. I just keep shuffling things over from the secret pile to the shouting pile!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra Odell is an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. She attended Clarion West in 2010. Her first collection of short stories was released from Hydra House Books in 2012. She is currently hard at work avoiding her first novel.

Author Spotlight: Adam-Troy Castro

Laurel Amberdine

Cerile and the journeyer are stuck in an endless cycle, but at the end Cerile remains determined to keep trying. Do you think she will ever convince him to stay?

Nope. If he ever becomes complacent enough to stay, he's not the man he is, one addicted to proving himself. She is omnipotent and can only serve this aspect of him by sending him away, to fight his way back. It's an insoluble problem, and they'll likely keep on going until he falls on the road.

I really liked the name Cerile. Did it come from anywhere?

You have touched on a sore spot. A few years ago, the story was published online, without my consent or any offered compensation, in the blog of a reader who professed to love it but introduced one change, naming the witch "Titania." I found this change tin-eared and ridiculous, the act of an uninvited editor who didn't stop to think that writers may have specific good reasons for naming their characters as they do. I hasten to report that the trespass was settled amicably, as the blogger turned out to be one of those guys who acts out of well-meaning naïveté and not any intentional contempt for the rights of authors — even if (I must also report) a couple of the readers on his page made the usual snotty comments to the effect that my concern for our own intellectual property proved that I "only cared about money" and "not about [my] readers" and the rest of that tiresome codswallop you hear from folks who have no problem insisting that writers work for free. Either way, I am happy to put another shovelful of dirt on the long-buried "Titania" version, because I really did craft the name "Cerile" very carefully, and with a very specific resonance in mind. Her name is, in fact, a comment on the action. Not to put too fine a point on it: It's pronounced "Surreal." Now, isn't that better than yet another

vaguely magical lady named “Titania”?

How do you go about planning and writing a short story like this?

This was one of those very rare and very blessed cases of a story coming out in one writing session of less than two hours, though I gave it a second pass one day later; the deadline for the anthology in question was imminent, and I began composition knowing what I wanted the story to be like.

What are you working on lately?

I’m hammering away on a young adult novel, but have been particularly fecund with short fiction of late, and have four science fiction tales of various lengths coming in *Analog,* as well as a couple of horror stories also in the publication pipeline.

And finally, a very important question: I know you have a number of adorable cats. What part do they play in your creative process?

I should say they get between me and the screen, because they do. But when one or another of them occupies the cat bed to the right of my keyboard, the service rendered is not considering it strange or frightening when I act out dialogue . . . and carefully reminding me when it’s time for lunch.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurel Amberdine was raised by cats in the suburbs of Chicago. She’s good at naps, begging for food, and turning ordinary objects into toys. She recently moved to San Francisco with her husband, and is enjoying its vastly superior weather. Between naps, she’s working on polishing up a few science fiction and fantasy novels, and hopes to send them out into the world soon.

Author Spotlight: Will Kaufman

Sandra Odell

The story is told with a bonhomie that guides and nurtures the tale, breathing life into both the fantastic and mundane. How do you envision the teller of this tale, the narrative voice if given physical form?

As a bearded, bespectacled, slightly chubby, prematurely greying, white dude in his mid-thirties? No, actually I sort of pictured the narrator as a bit of an extension of the wet gentleman himself. He gets some satisfaction from the fear, uncertainty, and suffering of the characters in his story, and the wet gentleman's victory is his victory. All that bonhomie is part of his shtick. He's the kind to get you to buy him a drink in a way that makes you think he's doing you a favor. That is, if you'd even approach the grinning, hawkish stranger wearing a frayed, silk suit, and sitting at the end of the bar where all the lights have mysteriously gone out.

The story follows a wonderful cyclic pattern that lends itself well to the end of the tale. What sort of challenges were there in writing a story that did not follow a set, linear path?

In a way, this story was easier to write than a linear one. The format allowed me to write whichever scene seemed most obvious at any given moment in the process, then let that inform what happened in "earlier" scenes. I wrote the vignettes out of order, then wrote the connective tissue. When I'm writing a linear story, I really feel a compulsion to write in a linear manner. I should probably do something about that, because it can be really crippling at times.

You also seem to draw heavily on traditional faerie tales such as "The Frog Prince" and "The Princess and The Frog." What

inspired you to write a faerie tale of your own?

I didn't really set out to write a faerie tale when I started this story. Honestly, it came out of listening to someone talk about his teenage church experiences. I don't remember the details of the conversation (cool story, right?), but he was talking about how personal confessional stories would bend to the communal need for particular known outcomes . . . or something . . .

Anyway, I was thinking about stories with known outcomes, and lit on the Lassie story. We all know what happens when little Timmy gets near a well with his faithful dog, don't we? That's right, he winds up at the bottom of the well.

So I started with that line, "you must know how the story ends," and just sort of slipped into the fairy-tale voice because it lends itself to delivering a story to an audience with a particular outcome in mind. Also, something about reading a story in that voice always makes me feel like I'm being screwed with, and that seemed like a really appropriate tone for this narrator. And, well, for faeries in general.

There is also a delightfully dark humor in the Wet Man's interactions. Do you have a favorite author when it comes to reading such humor?

I find humor in all sorts of weird places. I think there's great humor in books like *The Mongolian Conspiracy, The Longships, Votan, Geek Love, Super Flat Times* . . . I could go on and on. I'm always looking for the moment an author gets to a bleak, desperate place, then finds some little nugget of humor in language, voice, or story. But I love when it works the other way, too: Kelly Link and George Saunders can both start from a premise that seems comical and turn it into something heartbreaking.

Ambivalence is awesome: Twist the knife and make me smile.

You attended the Clarion workshop and have spoken highly of the program. How do you feel you benefited from the workshop?

Other than providing me with a community of established

professionals and talented up-and-comers who I now call my friends, challenging me to produce more work in less time than I thought possible, providing an inspiring and encouraging atmosphere in which I was able to write my first two pro-sale stories, showing me that there's a chance I can make money doing something I'm passionate about and giving me the confidence to pursue that possibility, teaching me valuable lessons about the industry and about myself, and sending me out into the world a more well-rounded writer than it found me?

Clarion does all that (and more) for a lot of people. For me, going in to Clarion I already had an MA and MFA in Creative Writing, which had taught me a lot of the most important rules of writing, and how to break those rules in interesting ways (well, I think they're interesting). What Clarion did was teach me about conceiving much more active stories and plots, and about engaging a broader spectrum of readers.

I can feel an "MFA vs. New New York" thinkpiece coming on me, so I'm going to stop picking at it.

Given your range of publications in both fiction and non-fiction, what can readers expect from you next?

The next piece I have coming out is in an anthology titled *A Book of Uncommon Prayer,* which is being published by Outpost 19. My prayer is "For Those Perusing Souvenirs Sold in Gas Stations and Truck Stops." As an atheist, I loved the idea of tackling the prayer form, and I'm super excited to be included in this book. It's got a lot of great authors in it.

Other than that, I suppose people can expect more of the same. By which I mean, short-form pieces that tend towards the strange. I'm really trying to put together enough short stories of high enough quality to justify shopping a collection, so I guess we'll see how that goes. I've got a novella I'm working on that's cross-genre in a way Northrop Frye might approve of . . . you know, the usual.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra Odell is an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. She attended Clarion West in 2010. Her first collection of short stories was released from

Hydra House Books in 2012. She is currently hard at work avoiding her first novel.

Author Spotlight: Elizabeth Bear

Jude Griffin

As with all mysteries, there is a balance between dropping enough clues that the revelation feels right to the reader but isn't so obvious by page five: Did you worry about tipping too far to one side or the other? If you had to choose, would you prefer to err on the side of too many or too few clues (or too obvious/too obscure)?

It's my experience that nearly every author goes through a series of cycles in stories in general — we underexplain, and then we overexplain, and then we correct too far once again. It's like a great slow pendulum swing of exposition. And of course the trick is that we can't all hit it out of the park for all readers consistently. Ideally, you want the emotional and plot revelations occurring to the reader about a half-second before the story spells them out . . . but since every reader is different, that gets tricky.

There are a number of very popular authors whose work I am not overly fond of because I find it obvious; I personally would rather be slightly confused than overexplained to. But I also appreciate that not all readers will agree.

The details in this story, the way all the senses are evoked, really stood out for me. When writing, do you imagine yourself fully immersed in the world of your story?

I tend to be a very kinesthetic learner and thinker, and I think that comes out in my writing. It's not so much imagining myself as fully immersed as that — I think, where some writers have a movie in their heads, for me it's more like method writing. I imagine how things would feel, and go from there.

I swooned over the hyacinth cat; any fan art of Chairman

Miaow?

Oh, we all want a hyacinth cat, I think. Except the idea of cats as smart as parrots is a little terrifying . . .

"House" is a mystery set in a science fiction world: Whose cross-genre work do you find thought-provoking?

I think I caught the spec fic mystery from Barbara Hambly and Isaac Asimov. For me, mysteries and thrillers are a natural plot structure to hang an SFF story off: There's a kind of problem-solving mindset that goes into both! And mysteries have a really good engine on them, plot-wise. They naturally generate tension and opportunities for character growth. It's super-efficient!

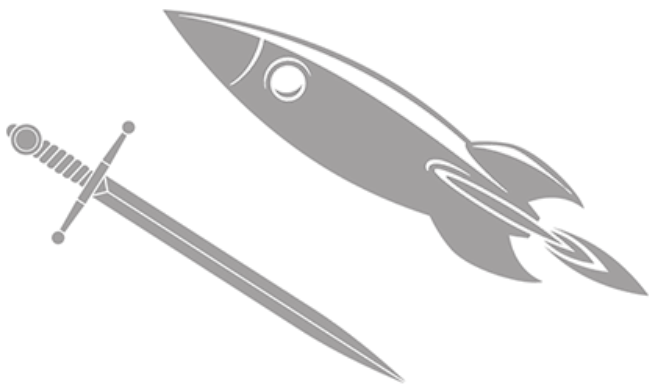
Any news you want to share?

I have a book coming out in February! It's called *Karen Memory,* and it's a steampunk Wild West story about a smart-mouthed soiled dove and her bosom companions taking on disaster capitalists!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, and photographer. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo; was a volunteer EMT, firefighter, and HAZMAT responder; worked as a guide and translator for journalists covering combat in Central America; lived in a haunted village in Thailand; ran an international frog monitoring network; and loves happy endings. Bonus points for frolicking dogs and kisses backlit by a shimmering full moon.

MISCELLANY



In the Next Issue of

Coming up in March, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Marissa Lingen (“Surfacing”) and Cat Sparks (“Hot Rods”), along with SF reprints by Michael Blumlein (“The Brains of Rats”) and Ursula K. Le Guin (“The New Atlantis”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Matthew Hughes (“A Face of Black Iron,” the penultimate episode of The Kaslo Chronicles) and Vajra Chandrasekera (“Documentary”), and fantasy reprints by Naomi Kritzer (“The Good Son”) and Liz Williams (“Adventures in the Ghost Trade”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author and artist spotlights, along with our review column and a feature interview .

For our ebook readers, we also have our usual ebook-exclusive novella reprint and a pair of novel excerpts.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out.

• • • •

Looking ahead beyond next month, we’ve got work from some terrific authors coming up over the next couple of issues, including C.C. Finlay, Seanan McGuire, Kat Howard, Megan Arkenberg, Carrie Vaughn, Maria Dahvana Headley, Dale Bailey, Andrea Hairston, Sam J. Miller, Sean McMullen, and others. Also coming up in May is the thrilling conclusion of Matthew Hughes’s The Kaslo Chronicles!

So be sure to keep an eye out for all that SFnal goodness in the months to come. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed.*

Thanks for reading!

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All caught up on *Lightspeed?* Good news! We also have lots of ebooks available from our sister-publications:

***Nightmare* Ebooks, Bundles, & Subscriptions:** Like *Lightspeed,* our sister-magazine *Nightmare* (nightmare-magazine.com) also has ebooks, bundles, and subscriptions available as well. For instance, you can get the complete first year (12 issues) of *Nightmare* for just $24.99; that's savings of $11 off buying the issues individually. Or, if you'd like to subscribe, a 12-month subscription to *Nightmare* includes 48 stories (about 240,000 words of fiction, plus assorted nonfiction), and will cost you just $23.88 ($12 off the cover price).

***Fantasy Magazine* Ebooks & Bundles:** We also have ebook back

issues — and ebook back issue bundles — of *Lightspeed's* (now dormant) sister-magazine, *Fantasy*. To check those out, just visit fantasy-magazine.com/store. You can buy each *Fantasy* bundle for $24.99, or you can buy the complete run of *Fantasy Magazine* — all 57 issues — for just $114.99 (that's $10 off buying all the bundles individually, and more than $55 off the cover price!).

About the Editor

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed,* is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy,* published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination, Armored, Brave New Worlds, Wastelands,* and *The Living Dead.* Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects, Robot Uprisings, Dead Man's Hand, Operation Arcana, Wastelands 2, Press Start to Play,* and The Apocalypse Triptych: *The End is Nigh, The End is Now,* and *The End Has Come.* Called "the reigning king of the anthology world" by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

ALSO EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

- THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH, Vol. 1: *The End is Nigh*
- THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH, Vol. 2: *The End is Now*
- THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH, Vol. 3: *The End Has Come* [Forthcoming, May 2015]
- *Armored*
- *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy* [Forthcoming, Oct. 2015]
- *Brave New Worlds*
- *By Blood We Live*
- *Dead Man's Hand*
- *Epic: Legends Of Fantasy*
- *Federations*
- *The Improbable Adventures Of Sherlock Holmes*
- *HELP FUND MY ROBOT ARMY!!! and Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*
- *Lightspeed Magazine*
- *The Living Dead*
- *The Living Dead 2*
- *The Mad Scientist's Guide To World Domination*
- *Nightmare Magazine*
- *Operation Arcana*
- *Other Worlds Than These*
- *Oz Reimagined*
- *Press Start to Play* [Forthcoming, Aug. 2015]
- *Robot Uprisings*

- *Seeds of Change*
- *Under the Moons of Mars*
- *Wastelands*
- *Wastelands 2*
- *The Way Of The Wizard*

Visit johnjosephadams.com to learn more about all of the above. Each project also has a mini-site devoted to it specifically, where you'll find free fiction, interviews, and more.

THE GEEK'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is an interview/talk show hosted by author David Barr Kirtley *(New Voices in Science Fiction, Fantasy: The Best of the Year)* and produced by editor/anthologist John Joseph Adams *(Lightspeed Magazine, The Living Dead)*.

The show covers fantasy and science fiction in literature, film, graphic novels, and video games, as well as related topics such as science, technology, and critical thinking. Each episode runs for approximately one hour. Each episode consists of either (a) a feature interview with a celebrity guest or (b) a panel discussion on a topic of geek-interest.

Guests have included:

- Novelists, such as: George R. R. Martin *(A Game of Thrones),* Dean Koontz *(Innocence),* Margaret Atwood *(The Handmaid's Tale),* Philip Pullman *(The Golden Compass),* Chuck Palahniuk *(Fight Club),* Joe Hill *(N0S4A2),* Dan Simmons *(The Terror),* Hugh Howey *(Wool),* Charlaine Harris (the Sookie Stackhouse/*True Blood* series), Lemony Snicket *(A Series of Unfortunate Events),* Junot Diaz *(The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao),* William Gibson *(Neuromancer),* Neal Stephenson *(Anathem);*
- Filmmakers, such as: John Cleese *(Monty Python),* David Cronenberg *(Scanners, A History of Violence),* Chris Williams *(Big Hero Six),* Felicia Day *(The Guild),* Simon Pegg *(Shaun of the Dead),* and Alexandre Philippe *(The People vs. George Lucas);*
- Comics writers, such as: Robert Kirkman *(The Walking Dead),* Mike Mignola *(Hellboy),* Allie Brosh *(Hyperbole and a Half),* Ryan North *(Dinosaur Comics),* David Malki *(Wondermark),* and Chris Roberson *(Superman);*
- Video Game Designers Ron Gilbert *(The Secret of Monkey Island),* Ted Kosmatka *(Portal 2),* and Chet Faliszek *(Left 4 Dead);*
- Scientists/Nonfiction Writers, such as: Naomi Klein *(This Changes Everything),* P.W. Singer *(Wired for War),* Paul Krugman *(New York Times* columnist/economist), Mary Roach *(Stiff),* Brian Greene *(Fabric of the Cosmos),* Neil deGrasse Tyson *(Nova scienceNOW),* and Richard Dawkins *(The God Delusion).*

The A.V. Club calls *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* "an informative and impressively in-depth podcast well worth checking out." The show often ranks as the #1 Literature podcast on iTunes, and has more than 450 5-star ratings.

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TIRED OF TIME TRAVEL?
HOW ABOUT THE APOCALYPSE?

Editor John Joseph Adams has edited several anthologies about dystopias and the apocalypse that you might enjoy:

WASTELANDS: STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE
edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, January 2008

From the Book of Revelation to *The Road Warrior;* from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* to *The Road,* storytellers have long imagined the end of the world, weaving eschatological tales of catastrophe, chaos, and calamity. In doing so, these visionary authors have addressed one of the most challenging and enduring themes of imaginative fiction: the nature of life in the aftermath of total societal collapse.

Gathering together the best post-apocalyptic literature of the last two decades from many of today's most renowned authors of speculative fiction — including George R.R. Martin, Gene Wolfe, Orson Scott Card, Carol Emshwiller, Jonathan Lethem, Octavia E. Butler, and Stephen King — *Wastelands* explores the scientific, psychological, and philosophical questions of what it means to remain human in the wake of Armageddon.

johnjosephadams.com/wastelands

WASTELANDS 2: MORE STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE
edited by John Joseph Adams
Titan Books, February 2015

For decades, the apocalypse and its aftermath have yielded some of the most exciting short stories of all time. From David Brin's seminal "The Postman" to Hugh Howey's "Deep Blood Kettle" and Tananarive Due's prescient "Patient Zero," the end of the world

continues to thrill. This companion volume to the critically-acclaimed *Wastelands* offers thirty of the finest examples of post-apocalyptic short fiction, including works by George R.R. Martin, Junot Díaz, Seanan McGuire, Paolo Bacigalupi, and more. Award-winning editor John Joseph Adams has once again assembled a who's who of short fiction, and the result is nothing short of mind-blowing.

johnjosephadams.com/wastelands-2

THE LIVING DEAD
edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, September 2008

From *White Zombie* to *Dawn of the Dead,* from *Resident Evil* to*World War Z,* zombies have invaded popular culture, becoming the monsters that best express the fears and anxieties of the modern west. The ultimate consumers, zombies rise from the dead and feed upon the living, their teeming masses ever hungry, ever seeking to devour or convert, like mindless, faceless eating machines. Zombies have been depicted as mind-controlled minions, the shambling infected, the disintegrating dead, the ultimate *lumpenproletariat,* but in all cases, they reflect us, mere mortals afraid of death in a society on the verge of collapse.

Gathering together the best zombie literature of the last three decades from many of today's most renowned authors of fantasy, speculative fiction, and horror, including Stephen King, Harlan Ellison®, Robert Silverberg, George R. R. Martin, Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Neil Gaiman, Joe Hill, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Joe R. Lansdale, *The Living Dead,* covers the broad spectrum of zombie fiction, ranging from Romero-style zombies to reanimated corpses to voodoo zombies and beyond.

johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead

THE LIVING DEAD 2
edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, September 2010

Readers eagerly devoured *The Living Dead.* Now acclaimed editor John Joseph Adams is back for another bite at the apple — the Adam's apple, that is — with 43 more of the best, most chilling, most thrilling zombie stories anywhere, including virtuoso performances by zombie fiction legends Max Brooks *(World War Z, The Zombie Survival Guide),* Robert Kirkman *(The Walking Dead),* and David Wellington *(Monster Island).*

From *Left 4 Dead* to *Zombieland* to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies,* ghoulishness has never been more exciting and relevant. Within these pages samurai warriors face off against the legions of hell, necrotic dinosaurs haunt a mysterious lost world, and eerily clever zombies organize their mindless brethren into a terrifying army.

The Living Dead 2 has more of what zombie fans hunger for — more scares, more action, more. . . brains. Experience the indispensable series that defines the very best in zombie literature.

johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead-2

ROBOT UPRISINGS
edited by Daniel H. Wilson & John Joseph Adams
Vintage Books, April 2014

As real robots creep into our lives, so does a sense of fear — we have all wondered what horrifying scenarios might unfold if our technology were to go awry. The idea of a robot uprising is fascinating precisely because it is possible. This anthology will bring to life the answers to our half-formed questions by providing a collection of meticulously precise, exhilarating trips into a future in which humans survive only by being more clever and tenacious than the machines they have created.

At the helm of this project are Daniel H. Wilson—bestselling novelist and expert in robotics—and John Joseph Adams—bestselling editor of more than a dozen science fiction/fantasy anthologies. Together, they have drawn on their wide-ranging contacts to assemble a talented group of authors eager to attack the topic of robot uprisings from startling and fascinating angles.

Featuring work by Hugh Howey, Seanan McGuire, Scott Sigler, Charles Yu, Anna North, Robin Wasserman, Ernest Cline, Jeff Abbott, Julianna Baggott, and many more, plus a new novella from

Daniel H. Wilson.

johnjosephadams.com/robot-uprisings

BRAVE NEW WORLDS
edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, January 2011

You are being watched.

When the government wields its power against its own people, every citizen becomes an enemy of the state. Will you fight the system, or be ground to dust beneath the boot of tyranny?

In his smash-hit anthologies *Wastelands* and *The Living Dead,* acclaimed editor John Joseph Adams showed you what happens when society is utterly wiped away. Now he brings you a glimpse into an equally terrifying future — what happens when civilization invades and dictates every aspect of your life?

From *1984* to *The Handmaid's Tale,* from *Children of Men* to*Bioshock,* the dystopian imagination has been a vital and gripping cautionary force. *Brave New Worlds* collects 33 of the best tales of totalitarian menace by some of today's most visionary writers.

johnjosephadams.com/brave-new-worlds

THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH:
The End is Nigh* | *The End is Now* | *The End Has Come
edited by John Joseph Adams & Hugh Howey
March 2014, September 2014, April 2015

Famine. Death. War. Pestilence. These are the harbingers of the biblical apocalypse, of the End of the World. In science fiction, the end is triggered by less figurative means: nuclear holocaust, biological warfare/pandemic, ecological disaster, or cosmological cataclysm.

But before any catastrophe, there are people who see it coming. During, there are heroes who fight against it. And after, there are the survivors who persevere and try to rebuild. THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH will tell their stories.

Edited by acclaimed anthologist John Joseph Adams and

bestselling author Hugh Howey, THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH is a series of three anthologies of apocalyptic fiction. THE END IS NIGH focuses on life before the apocalypse. THE END IS NOW turns its attention to life during the apocalypse. And THE END HAS COME focuses on life after the apocalypse.

Visit johnjosephadams.com/apocalypse-triptych to learn more about THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH or to read interviews with the authors. You can also sign up for our newsletter if you would like to be reminded when the other volumes of the TRIPTYCH become available.

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COMING SOON
FROM EDITOR JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

You might also be interested in the following forthcoming books edited by John Joseph Adams:

BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY 2015
Series Editor: John Joseph Adams, Guest Editor: Joe Hill
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, October 2015

The Best American series is the premier annual showcase for the country's finest short fiction and nonfiction. Each volume's series editor selects notable works from hundreds of magazines, journals, and websites. A special guest editor—a leading writer in the field—then chooses the best twenty or so pieces to publish. This unique system has made the Best American series the most respected—and most popular—of its kind.

Now, with *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy,* series editor John Joseph Adams will curate a new anthology series that will demonstrate what science fiction and fantasy literature is capable of.

Fans of the genres know that the finest science fiction and fantasy is on par with the finest works of literature in any genre, and the goal of this anthology series is to prove it.

The 2015 volume will collect the best material published in 2014, selected by series editor John Joseph Adams and guest editor Joe Hill.

johnjosephadams.com/best-american

PRESS START TO PLAY
edited by Daniel H. Wilson & John Joseph Adams
Vintage Books, August 2015

Video games have become a multi-billion dollar a year industry

that has outpaced movies and books combined. The humble, pixelated games of the ’70s and ’80s have evolved into the vivid, realistic, and immersive form of entertainment that now rivals all other forms of media for dominance in the consumer marketplace. For many, video games have become *the* cultural icons around which the entire entertainment industry revolves.

So if exploring video games has become one of the primary ways we create and experience narratives, why not create some narratives that explore the way we create and experience video games?

In this book you will find twenty-five stories that recreate the feel of a video game in prose form, stories that play with the core concepts of video games, and stories about the creation or playing of video games themselves.

Featuring: original fiction from video game industry veterans such as Marc Laidlaw *(Half-Life),* Austin Grossman *(Dishonored),* Micky Neilson *(World of Warcraft),* Rhianna Pratchett *(Tomb Raider),* and Chris Avellone *(Fallout: New Vegas)*; original fiction from new and notable writers of science fiction and fantasy, including Hiroshi Sakurazaka *(All You Need is Kill,* basis for the film *Edge of Tomorrow),* Seanan McGuire *(Half-Off Ragnarok),* Charles Yu *(How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe),* Robin Wasserman *(The Waking Dark),* Andy Weir *(The Martian)* and Hugh Howey *(Wool);* plus, selected reprints by authors such as T.C. Boyle *(World’s End),* Catherynne M. Valente *(Deathless),* Ken Liu *(The Grace of Kings),* Cory Doctorow *(Little Brother),* and others.

[website forthcoming]

OPERATION ARCANA
edited by John Joseph Adams
Baen Books, March 2015

In the realms of fantasy, the battlefield is where heroism comes alive, magic is unleashed, and legends are made and unmade. From the War of the Ring, Tolkien’s epic battle of good versus evil, to The Battle of the Blackwater, George R.R. Martin’s grim portrait of the horror and futility of war, these fantastical conflicts reflect our highest hopes and darkest fears, bringing us mesmerizing visions of silver spears shining in the sun and vast hordes of savage beasts

who threaten to destroy all that we hold dear.

Now acclaimed editor John Joseph Adams is sounding the battle cry and sixteen of today's top authors are reporting for duty, spinning never-before-published, spellbinding tales of military fantasy, including a Black Company story from Glen Cook, a Paksenarrion story from Elizabeth Moon, and a Shadow Ops story by Myke Cole. Within these pages you'll also find World War I trenches cloaked in poison gas and sorcery, modern day elite special forces battling hosts of the damned, and steampunk soldiers fighting for their lives in a world torn apart by powers that defy imagination.

Featuring both grizzled veterans and fresh young recruits alike, including Tanya Huff, Simon R. Green, Carrie Vaughn, Jonathan Maberry, and Seanan McGuire, Operation Arcana is a must for any military buff or fantasy fan. You'll never look at war the same way again.

johnjosephadams.com/operation-arcana